

Happy Birthday

Pentecost 2010

St. Francis of Assisi Episcopal Church Novato

Written and Preached by the Rev. Susan D. Parsons

Happy Birthday to the Christian Church
Is an appropriate way to
Start the sermon this morning
Today is the Feast of Pentecost
What we call the birthday of the church
It is the day when a group of
Anxious unimpressive disciples
Who are gathered in an upper room have
The Holy Spirit descend on them
'Like the rush of a mighty wind' and
'Tongues of flame' float above their heads

The Holy Spirit
God as wind and fire and breath
That's the best the Bible can do in
Describing what it's like when God
Comes into the lives of the disciples

When we join them this morning
They are gathered with about
A hundred and twenty of Jesus' closest friends
Waiting wondering what to do next
Jesus has been reappearing to them after his death and
Telling them he is going to
Send them an Advocate
That's John's word for
The Spirit in today's Gospel
But so far no one no advocate has come along to help them
To show them the way
Nothing has happened and so
They have gathered together to wait

Or huddled you might say because
They are a frightened and anxious bunch of souls
They saw what happened to Jesus and
They wonder if it could happen to them

All of a sudden
What sounds and feels like the roar of a tornado
Tears through the room
Through them
And they are none of them
Ever the same again
The Christian church is born through them

There were people from all over the world
Out in the streets of Jerusalem that day
There was a big Jewish festival and
The people in the streets
Heard something going on in that upper room and
They heard their own languages being spoken by
This bunch of country bumpkins
This group of frightened anxious people had become
Bold articulate passionate and
They go out and change the world

Just the opposite of what happens
In the first reading we heard The Tower of Babel
It's an ancient myth that was told to
Explain why people are alienated from one another
(We didn't hear it in this service but you remember)
The people of the world have become
Proud and arrogant
They all speak the same language and
They decide to build a city and a tower
Up to heaven but
Their ambitions are shattered when
Their language breaks apart and
They can no longer understand each other
They are scattered across the world
Divided from one another
Babbling and cut off
Pentecost is God's response to what divides us
God's healing of the babble of division
Race nationality money resources gender
Our own self-absorption
All the division

The healing Spirit that filled Jesus
That filled the apostles and the others
Now fills all of us through baptism
Our mission is to
Undo the babble of the world by
Building up a community that heals division
Which is what God has wanted
For our world from the beginning

That's why we're here
To be the church is to be Spirited people
Spreading this Spirit of communion
To be healing of the world

Now we tend to think that the work of
Healing and unity is going to be
Quiet and organized patient neat clean
Jesus talks about how the Advocate will
Bring peace and
That mighty wind that blew through the disciples
Did bring them peace but
It's not the kind of peace the world has to give

There is this wonderful story
I must tell you here
Of this priest in a large church in Florida
Who wanted to dramatize the
Holy Spirit coming like a mighty wind in a
Particularly spectacular manner
So he got the engine out of
One of those boats that they use in the Everglades
You've seen them on TV
They are huge engines and
Basically an airplane propeller
Attached to a big gasoline engine and
He mounted this engine in the choir loft
The idea was that
The wind from the propeller would
Blow out across the congregation
When he got to the
Appropriate moment in the Holy Spirit story

So the priest and the head usher
Gave it a dry run on Saturday afternoon and
Although it was incredibly noisy
It worked really well and
They were so excited about
What a spectacular effect
It was going to have on Sunday morning
So on Pentecost morning the lector read
'...and suddenly from Heaven
There came a sound like the rush of a violent wind' and
At that exact moment the head usher
Gave one pull gave a second pull gave a third pull and
That engine *howled* into life

But on Sunday morning
Things are different than they are on Saturday afternoon
First of all the choir members are now in place
And they weren't there for the practice run
And this sudden screaming gust of wind sent
Sheet music flying all over the congregation
Hairdos of the congregation became unglued
The preacher's sermon literally
Gone with the wind
A hairpiece flew toward the altar
The congregation did indeed come alive in the Spirit

That's the way it is with the Spirit
It's the part of God that refuses to be
Restrained or stopped or contained
It will not stay in the careful boundaries
We set for the Holy Spirit

Here at St. Francis the Spirit moves
Through two services in a more
Dignified sort of way while
At the other two services
It moves through here like a airplane engine and
The wind some Sundays does seem to come from the choir loft

When Michael Barlowe was out here last fall
He told the Vestry that best practice

Would be for St. Francis to
Not get moving on anything for
3 months after Fr. Phil left
We should just get used to being without Phil

When he came out to talk with us in February
He said to me privately that
He was startled at the level of excitement The Spirit
He felt from the congregation but again
Counseled to go slow but
We are so full of the Spirit that
When he came knocking on our door last week and
He didn't find us huddled in an upper room
He gave up telling me to slow down
This time he told me we needed to have more fun

We are moving and doing
The finance committee has started researching
The long term goals
They are researching policies and procedures
They are looking into ways to save money
The communications people are writing up legal letters
To help with the vandalism and
Figuring out how to get our name in the paper without
Us having to do something reprehensible or immoral
Buildings and grounds has had inspections done and
Made up a to do list and
The men's group has fixed things and
Got us together and to clean the place up
Outreach
 apparently not busy enough
Is now planning to join forces with
Other Episcopal Churches in Marin to feed the hungry
Hospitality is planning game nights and
They've convinced me to combine services on July 4th so
We can all go watch the parade together at 10 that morning and
Then have a big bbq
We've had an auction that made money
Trained new Stephen Ministers
Had a fancy party after the Easter Vigil
Written new prayers for services

Had an innovative memorial service
We did all of this and
A whole lot more
In less than 4 months
We are healing and bringing together and
We are working to make the kingdom a reality right here

Now if you'd still like a little more Spirit
In your life
You can you know ask for the Spirit to come but
I don't advise it if
You want everything to stay tied down
Neat and organized
The people on the search committee
Whether they knew it or not
Have just turned a airplane engine on in their lives
So has anyone who is on the Vestry
When the Spirit blows and
God starts working
You gotta move
You may find yourself doing things you never dreamed
Thinking of a new direction in your work
Stepping back from the rat race that is your life and
Doing something for the church
Serving meals going to Bible study
Giving more to the church
So be careful what you pray for
But if you want a little excitement in your life
I have a prayer for you

Come Holy Spirit and kindle in us the fire of your love
Take our minds and think through them
Take our lips and speak through them
Take our souls and set them on fire

Can I get an Amen
Hallelu-jah