

Towson Presbyterian Church

May 20, 2018 – Pentecost & Confirmation Sunday

Rev. Joel Strom

Act 2:1-21

“There is Church Because There is a Mission”

Well happy Pentecost everyone! Is anyone having Pentecost dinner tonight or a just a good-old Pentecost party? No?

We have Easter and Christmas, and right after those two, the next biggest day of the year for us is probably Pentecost. And so if we *were* to have Pentecost dinner tonight, what would we have? I guess we'd make sure that there were candles on the table. Maybe the main course would be fondue, so we get that flame burning? Your guess is as good as mine.

Our other two big days get intertwined and enmeshed within our culture – Christmas has Santa Clause and Easter has the Easter bunny - and thank God Pentecost does not have a mascot. I don't know who it would be to begin with and I don't even want to think about it.

Maybe it's a good thing that Pentecost is not a cultural holiday that people are obligated to observe or acknowledge, because that means that Pentecost *is our day*. Pentecost is solely the church's day, and maybe that's a good thing.

In our scripture reading from the book of Acts, chapter 2, the Spirit comes rushing into the room the disciples were gathering in and they start speaking in different languages. And they're recognizable, and so someone from Egypt and Cappadocia and Crete hear their own language being spoken. The message from all of them is a description of the mighty and powerful acts of God. Something absolutely mysterious, but yet incredibly powerful is happening, and so people begin to ask, “What does this mean? What's going on here?”

Peter stands up and says, “This is what the prophet Joel was talking about years ago. God will one day pour out the Spirit upon all flesh – men and women, young and old, everyone.” If we were to read past verse 21, Peter finishes by saying, in so many words, “This same Spirit that Joel was talking about – this Spirit is now calling us to share the Good News of God's love with the world.”

And so, at this moment here in Acts, the church begins. It's here where the church takes its first steps. Today, at Pentecost we celebrate the birth of the church, and by doing so we are reminded of who we are as a church, and who God is calling us to be and to do. Pentecost brings us back to the very beginning. Pentecost also reminds us that we are not just part of Towson Presbyterian Church, and not just the larger Presbyterian Church, but we are part of this much larger, global church.

Occasionally my family heads over to Oregon Ridge Nature Center in Hunt Valley for a hike, and after you get off 83 and before you turn left at the Oregon Grille, we pass on Shawan Rd. this fairly new Orthodox Church. You can't miss it. It's the *St. Mary Antiochian Orthodox Church*. It's only about a year old, but what makes it so unique is its architecture.

It's not a modern-day looking church – it looks like a Greek Orthodox Church that you would find in, well, Greece. When I drive past it, I do my best to keep my eye on the road but take a hard look at it, because it's beautiful, and it's so out of place. It's not what you would expect in Hunt Valley. It reminds me of some of the churches I visited in Greece.

During my first year of seminary, Kim and I married, and for our honeymoon later that summer we traveled to Greece, Turkey and Rome, and our itinerary took us a couple days to the Greek Island of Santorini. *I know, woe is me*. One day we decided to rent a 4-wheel ATV's and tour the island, which was the common touristy thing to do there. And so later that day as we followed the road that would take us around the island, the road eventually took us by the ocean and then straight up to the top of the island.

As we were making our way up, I noticed this Orthodox Church perched at the top, overlooking the ocean. Wanting to stop and check it out, we pulled off to the side. It was fairly small, and looked like a typical Orthodox Church - domed at the top. It had been there for a long time. Thankfully, the sanctuary door was open and we got to walk in. It was small, but beautiful. Every part of the wall and ceiling was covered in some kind of ornamentation. A lot of it Byzantine art, the rest carefully crafted woodwork that was bursting with color.

That church's service would have been in Greek, which I could not follow. Their worship style would have been vastly different to what I'm accustomed to. But I still felt this sense of solidarity with those who called that church home. Maybe it was the iconography - maybe it was the cross that was front and center in the sanctuary.

In Turkey we eventually made our way to Cappadocia, which is one of the geographical areas and languages being spoken in Acts chapter 2. It's hard to describe Cappadocia – you just have to see it for yourself. Its topography is incredibly unique and made up of these honeycombed hills and boulders. The stone that makes up these boulders is incredibly soft, so for centuries people have carved out homes within the boulders. When you're in Cappadocia you stay in a cave hotel and you take a balloon ride early in the morning that gives you an amazing view of this incredibly unique place.

We stayed in this town called Goreme, which is known for the *Goreme Open-Air Museum*, but the museum is actually inside caves. As you walk into the caves, you enter into these carved out-of-the-rock churches, chapels and monasteries, that are covered wall-to-wall with Byzantine art and eye-popping color, many that date back to 1200 C.E., and some even to 800 C.E. And these Christians from so long ago, they didn't just carve out four walls – there was architectural intent and design to them. The art on the walls often told Biblical stories, and other times commemorated the lives of saints who had died.

It was breathtaking. And after visiting a few of them, I ended up by myself for a few minutes, alone in a cave/chapel, and a similar feeling arose in me that came up in the Orthodox Church in Santorini. I grew up in Connecticut; I was living in New Jersey at the time. The communities of faith that gathered in these caves hundreds and hundreds of years ago were nothing like me – different time, country, language and culture.

And yet, I felt this sense of solidarity with them that we were both a part of the same movement that began 2,000 years ago. We were both swimming in the Christian tradition. We both were a part of the Church. We both were participating in the movement of God’s love to the world. We were very different, but actually, a lot in common.

Today we celebrate and welcome our Confirmands, who have joined our church and become members. What’s really happening today is these teens are saying “Yes” to a movement. They are saying “yes” to be a part of the movement of God’s love to the world. To say yes to the church is to believe that God is *for* our world.

Our church exists because there is a mission in front of us that calls us. It’s not vice versa. We don’t have a mission because we have a church. Mission comes first, and then the Church. Towson Presbyterian Church exists, because God’s mission – the movement of God’s love to the world – is before us, and it calls us to be and to do.

As I was finishing up my last year of seminary, it was finally time for my Presbyterian classes, and required reading for these classes was the *Book of Order*. Now if you’re not familiar with the Book of Order, it’s part of our Constitution along with our Book of Confessions. It’s what gives us our structure, how we govern ourselves, and clarifies what we believe.

The name itself – the *Book of Order* – just screams Presbyterian, doesn’t it? If Presbyterians are known for doing things decently and orderly, how fitting to have the *Book of Order*. When I looked at my syllabus and noticed that it would be required reading, I sighed a little bit. “Ugghhh...this is not going to be fun.” I came to this book with very negative assumptions. First, I thought it would be boring. And second, I thought it would constrain and suck the life out of what it means to be a church.

We got our first assignment – read the first 30 pages – and one afternoon I opened it up.

The Foundations of Presbyterian Polity – Chapter 1 – The Mission of the Church

“The good news of the Gospel is that the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—creates, redeems, sustains, rules, and transforms all things and all people. This one living God, the Scriptures say, liberated the people of Israel from oppression and covenanted to be their God. By the power of the Spirit, this one living God is incarnate in Jesus Christ, who came to live in the world, die for the world, and be raised again to new life. The Gospel of Jesus Christ announces the nearness of God’s kingdom, bringing good news to all who are impoverished, sight to all who are blind, freedom to all who are oppressed, and proclaiming the Lord’s favor upon all creation.”¹

¹ http://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/book-of-order2017-electronic_updated110117.pdf

I closed it, and sat back in my chair. God's mission in Jesus Christ is not sit back and be completely removed from life on earth. No. God's mission in Jesus Christ is to announce the nearness of God's kingdom and proclaim the Lord's favor upon ALL of creation. I can get behind that.

I turned to the second paragraph...

*"The mission of God in Christ gives shape and substance to the life and work of the Church. In Christ, the Church participates in God's mission for the transformation of creation and humanity by proclaiming to all people the good news of God's love, offering to all people the grace of God at font and table, and calling all people to discipleship in Christ. Human beings have no higher goal in life than to glorify and enjoy God now and forever, living in covenant fellowship with God and participating in God's mission."*²

The mission of the church – the foundation, the bedrock, the shape and substance of the church – is to participate in the mission of God.

And so Confirmands, and everyone else – why are here? Why are we a community of faith? We are part of a movement of people who are participating in the movement of God's love to the world. And we are a church because there is a mission in front of us.

And that same Spirit that came rushing in to that room of disciples at Pentecost, filling them with strength, power and courage...

That same Spirit that filled and empowered the community of believers in Cappadocia...

That same Spirit that filled and empowered that church on that hilltop in Santorini...

That same Spirit is here. *Right here*...filling us strength, courage, and reminding us that God is up to something very good in the world...

And inviting us to participate and join in the movement of God's love to the world.

Merry Pentecost, everyone!

² http://oga.pcusa.org/site_media/media/uploads/oga/pdf/book-of-order2017-electronic_updated110117.pdf