

“The Converted Community”

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Acts 2: 14, 32-39

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Today is Pentecost. Today we celebrate the birth of the church. Not the birth of this particular congregation and not the birth of the wider denomination the United Church of Canada, but the birth of *The Church*.

You can read about it in Acts chapter 2. On that day the followers of Jesus were together in the Upper Room, the room where Jesus celebrated the last Passover meal and instituted the Last Supper. As they prayed, a sound: “Like the rush of a violent wind” filled the room. The scripture says that tongues of fire appeared over them and they were “Filled with the Holy Spirit”. These ordinary, fearful followers of Jesus were filled with the glory of God and with that, the church was born.

It was an amazing day and display of the powerful and miraculous presence of God.

Martha Grace Reese is a researcher and a church consultant. She directed the big Lilly Endowment-funded Mainline Evangelism Project. The study included over 1,200 interviews of mainline churches across the theological spectrum. One of the things she discovered after studying 150 mainline churches that are really alive and growing is that all of these vibrant churches have a set of three relationships that are very **real** and **healthy**: (1) relationships with God (2) relationships with each other as a Christian community and (3) relationships with people outside the church.

At a gut level, this makes sense to me. When I look at the story of Pentecost, the story of the birth of the church, each of those three elements were present. If we want the church to thrive today and if you want to feel fulfilled in your personal faith, then those three relationships need to be present.

The first is a living relationship with God. There is no question that the disciples experienced the power of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. It wasn't education that shaped the church, it wasn't a sense of duty, it wasn't even great leadership; rather, it was a profound awe that Christ really was truly alive and present through the Holy Spirit.

Do you remember the gospel story where Jesus is sleeping in a boat and his disciples are freaking out because there is a really bad storm and they are sure that they are going to drown? While the storm is going on and Jesus is asleep they are afraid ... but when they wake Jesus up and Jesus calms the storm, they are terrified and filled with awe. When you really

experience the power of God and know deep down that this transcendent God knows you and loves you and hears your prayers and answers those prayers, it is humbling and awesome. What the disciples experienced on the boat and what they experienced all the more at the resurrection of Jesus and on the day of Pentecost is something beyond description, and the church can't live without it.

As Rick Warren says, ***'to feel loved by God... is the starting point for every ministry, every revival, every renewal, every great awakening.'***

There's a story of two people who were overheard talking as they stood across the street from a large church which was being destroyed by fire. The one man said to the other: "This is the first time I ever saw you at church." Without missing a beat, the second responded: "This is the first time I ever saw the church on fire!"

There are churches that have lost faith in a God who saves and answers prayer and transforms lives. They may have a good sense of outreach and even get along well with each other, but they are not operating under the power of the Holy Spirit. It may last for a while, but the difference is running off your own steam, which is so limited, versus harnessing the limitless and incredible power of the Holy Spirit.

I remember when there was a lot of news coverage about the fact that there is an Atheist minister in the United Church and the media wanted an interview between a more conservative minister and the Atheist minister, Gretta Vosper. They called on Rev. Connie den Bok to be the conservative voice. The media really wanted a fight. They were really hoping Connie would go on the attack, but Connie is a strong woman of faith and she refused to play that role. I do remember a story Connie told about a man who was walking by a church one night. The inside of the church was lit up and the man could clearly see people inside jumping all around and acting erratically. To the man standing outside it looked absurd, but from inside it was a different story. Inside there was music and the people were dancing to the music. The man outside could see the movement, but couldn't hear the music. So it is with people who don't have a faith -- for whatever reason, they can't hear the music that gives us life and makes us dance. Let's tune our ears to the music and invite others in to dance along with us!

At the evening service, Celebrate Life, we always have a time that we call "God Sightings". In this session people are encouraged to share stories of when they experienced the Holy, when they felt the presence of God. These stories are always so meaningful.

I hear the music; I experience the holiness of God regularly.

Once I was visiting a man who was dying, and the man was in and out of consciousness, but mostly his eyes were closed and he seemed not to be aware. I felt prompted to sing to him "Jesus Loves Me". I don't often sing when I visit, but somehow that thought, that music, popped into my head and so I sang. And as I sang, the man began to cry. His eyes were still closed but the tears ran down from the corners of his eyes and I felt the presence of God all around us. I also knew that soon that man would be in the fullness of the presence of God where there is incredible music and life. But for us, our call is to tune our ears to that music and invite others to hear it also.

The second relationship that needs to be real and healthy if we want to be a thriving church is our relationships with each other. When Peter stands up on the day of Pentecost to preach, he is not standing alone. The 11 other apostles are standing up there with him in solidarity. The second chapter of Acts, the fourteenth verse says: "***Then Peter stood up with the eleven and addressed the crowd.***" When he rises to speak, the other disciples get up to stand with him. They stand together. Peter had not been a perfect disciple, especially at the end. He messed up royally when he denied Jesus -- but the other disciples must have forgiven Peter because here they are standing with him.

How about us? Are we real with each other? Are we forgiving of each other?

I want to be clear that a healthy church is not free from conflict. (I'm always surprised when people are surprised that there is conflict in the church. The church is made up of humans!) It is not the absence of conflict that sets us aside, it is, or should be, our willingness to do the hard work of forgiving and restoring relationships.

I love this piece that The Ottawa Citizen published. It's a number of years old now but it is considered one of the best newspaper apologies of all times:

"The Ottawa Citizen and Southam News wish to apologize for our apology to Mark Steyn, published Oct. 22. In correcting the incorrect statements about Mr. Steyn published Oct. 15, we incorrectly published the incorrect correction. We accept and regret that our initial regrets were unacceptable and we apologize to Mr. Steyn for any distress caused by our previous apology."

Being humble enough to apologize for our mistakes and shortcomings and big enough to forgive others even when there is no apology -- that's what sets us aside.

Recently a group in our church did a course on the Book of Forgiving. We learned that *forgiving is a choice we make*. It's not easy. All through life and even in the church you will have people who disappoint you or even hurt you, and all through life you will disappoint and sometimes hurt others. I think broken relationships are the most painful part of life. So it's not easy to do the work of forgiving -- but if you want to heal, if you want to be set free from resentments and regret, if you want real life, then forgiveness is the path. It is the path that Jesus laid out for us.

God has a special calling for this church to reach out with the love of God to others who don't attend or don't regularly attend this church. That's the third relationship we need to be strong: **our relationship with others**. This includes being a blessing to neighbouring churches as we were last Sunday during the Conference service.

I can't begin to properly express how proud I am of this church for rising to the challenge of hosting the Bay of Quinte Conference Annual meeting last weekend. And it was a challenge! I think it stretched us beyond what we've ever done before. I can name about 1,000 glitches and annoyances related to that conference but we navigated and handled every single one of them so that the average conference attendee didn't notice and only saw the end result. Over and over again I have had people ask me in person and by email to thank you for what you accomplished and tell me how hospitable and outstanding our volunteers were. That doesn't mean you weren't occasionally cursing under your smiles, but wow! You really were amazing!

This includes the work of bringing in Refugees and opening our doors and our space for the Islamic Community to celebrate Ramadan. This includes feeding people with Sunday Suppers and countless other outreach actions. We do not exist as a church for ourselves. When things are difficult, when the budget is tight, sometimes there is a temptation to start circling the wagons and focusing on ourselves instead of looking up and seeing the needs around us. But that is a death knell for the church, because our purpose has always been and always will be beyond ourselves.

There's no question of that relationship on the day of Pentecost. Peter felt compelled to preach and teach through his words and the signs of the Spirit. The text says that over 3,000 were baptized and became followers of Jesus that day. I'm not sure that Peter even saw the line separating those already 'in' the church and those 'outside' the church. The good news he had inside him simply poured out of him in a powerful way to reach those who needed to hear the message that day.

At Wall Street we have a special calling to be a safe place and a place of healing for people who are broken and hurting. Our Celebrate Life Service has been amazing this year. Every week there are new people who come, and the pain they come with is staggering -- but so many report finding more peace, finding forgiveness and finding emotional healing from a difficult past.

We will never be a perfect church, but that's ok, because Jesus never set out to build a perfect church. He did build a church that had great humility and great courage and above all *buckets and buckets of grace for the people Jesus loves so much and for the people Jesus is still drawing into a relationship with him.*

I said earlier that there is nothing more painful than broken relationships and that is true, but what is also true is that *there is nothing more amazing than real relationships where people know you and still love you-- where you know others and still love them.*

That's not easy on our own. But as we deepen our relationship with God, the source of love, God's love fills us and makes it all possible.

Dare to draw closer to God. Dare to draw closer to what God loves the most: you and you and you -- beautiful, imperfect people with great potential and possibilities, and dare to draw others in to hear the life-giving music of faith. Thanks be to God.