

Pentecost 2018

So what exactly is going on today?

We've got balloons all over the place and ladies in red everywhere you look!

And our readings today are a heady mix of knee slapping joy, what with folks from Afghanistan to Zambia understanding everything these Galilean men are saying; combined with head-spinning visions of piles of dry bones becoming living, breathing, flesh-covered, human beings...

...as young women prophesy and old men dream dreams...

...as the Holy Spirit invades a locked upper room changing terrified men into fearless followers of the gospel!

Pentecost is often called the birthday of the church.

Today, God gives birth to something new and unexpected: the Church, this body of Christ, given to the world.

Which begs the question, what is the church?

And like most questions, the answer depends an awful lot on who you ask.

For some, the church is a club of like-minded and like-looking people who enjoy spending time together.

For others the church is a repository for moral laws and holy rules, the place to be part of if you want to save your neck in the next life.

For others, the church is an illusion factory, keeping the common folks in line with promises of pie in the sky in the sweet by and by.

But if we really want to know what the church is, there's one person who really does get it, and if we're serious about knowing what the church is, maybe we best ask Jesus.

But before we do that, I want to say a little bit about last week's vestry retreat, because one of the highlights of that retreat was in fact trying to discover just what the church is, and therefore, to discover just who we are, and what we mean to this world.

That highlight of the retreat happened when our pal Mike Smith had everyone grab a toothbrush, which we all did.

Then he had us notice the hand we held our toothbrush in.

We all held it in our dominant hand – righties with the right, lefties with the left.

And it felt fine and natural and relaxing as we brushed away.

Then he told us to switch hands and start brushing, now with our other hand, meaning nearly all of us started brushing left handed.

Which was difficult and uncomfortable and weird.

So when you go home today and are standing at the bathroom sink getting ready to brush your teeth, switch hands, and try it!

Next week you can report on how it feels!

I liked that little exercise because what it does is put some meat on the bones about what Jesus has to say about the church, words we heard this morning from John's gospel: in particular, these words:

“And when [the Advocate] comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment...”

Listen one more time:

“And when [the Advocate] comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment...”

About sin: what is it that keeps us separated from God?

About righteousness: what is it God actually longs for us to do?

About judgment: when we size up other people, what measuring stick do we use?

And just like left handed toothbrushing for us righties, and right handed toothbrushing for you lefties, Jesus’ answers to these questions are bound to make us squirm...

What’s crucial is understanding what Jesus means when he compares the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, to “the world.”

“The world” isn’t planet earth, nor is it our flesh and bones nor is it our daily lives.

“The world” means the way we are used to doing things, like right handed toothbrushing, like resorting to war to sort out our disagreements, like looking out for Me First, like putting my trust in my bank account or in my common sense.

That’s the stuff of the world.

But the stuff of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, is totally different.

It’s a left handed response to the dangers and uncertainties and foibles of this life; meaning, when someone becomes aggressive, we are called to calm down; when society boasts about power, pride and prestige, we are called to weakness, vulnerability, and humility.

Today, as we celebrate the birthday of the church, Jesus invites us to look deeply into just what this event means; for us, for the church and for the world.

And what it means has everything to do with power.

Which is always a good place to start because our lives are consumed by power, who has it, who doesn't, and who's reaching for it.

We see power being exercised every day, from heretical Muslims like ISIS to Putin's Russia to our own threats against Iran and North Korea.

We learn that we have soldiers stationed throughout the world, if not fighting, then training others to fight.

And this kind of power is most definitely right handed power — we know it, we use it, it feels right and good and just.

It's direct.

It gets results.

Nor is it limited to our military.

It's in our families.

It's in our neighborhoods.

Any time there are orders or discipline of children or control over one another, why, that's right-handed power.

And frankly, don't we long for a God who uses right handed power?

Stop that hunger God!

End poverty God!

Cure him, or her, or me...

Isn't that the God who, to our disappointment, rarely shows her face?

And yes, there's right handed power in the Bible, especially in the Older Testament.

Noah's a great example of this.

God looked at the creation he made, and the mess we made of it, and wipes the whole thing out.

Yet, he promises to never do that again, and from that time forward, it seems that God opts for what brings us here this morning, something called left handed power.

Power that is intuitive, creative, meandering, and very, very, patient.

Because, right handed power, while it's good at getting results, is terrible at creating relationships.

Screaming at a child or shooting someone may get results, but it won't get you a relationship.

Only left-handed power, a power that waits, that forgives, that takes the punishment, only that kind of power never closes the door on relationships.

And because the very nature of God is relationship (that's the heart of what we mean when we speak of the Trinity), then our very nature, as creatures made in the image and likeness of God, is also relationship; and relationship only thrives in an atmosphere of left handed power.

That's what Jesus means when he says "“And when [the Advocate] comes, he will prove the world wrong about sin and righteousness and judgment...”"

Because the world says sin is about breaking the rules, and righteousness is about being with the in crowd, and judgment always ends up with insiders and outsiders.

But in Jesus, sin means rejecting the hard road of relationship building.

In Jesus, righteousness is God's gift to us, a gift we receive when we love one another, extend friendship to strangers, when we forgive.

In Jesus, judgment always ends with the truth, and as we each face our own truths, and are purified by this hard work of truth telling, not about others, but about ourselves, why, lo and behold, there are no insiders and outsiders after all; instead, the whole world is home free, not because we are good, but because God is good.

What is the church then?

It is a collection of resident aliens in this world, charged with the holy task of bringing gospel values to a world obsessed with right handed power.

And if we are faithful to our task, then the dried bones of hopelessness will indeed be restored, and the eyes of old men will once again see visions of joy, and throughout this whole wide world, we, as one people, can shout,

“Bless the Lord, O my soul.

Hallelujah!”

+amen

