

In my family May is birthday month. It starts with me on May 1st.

Last week at the beach we celebrated Mom & Dad's birthdays,
and this week it was Emily and my nephew's.

Sometimes we talk about Pentecost as the birthday of the Church,
and even if that isn't 100% accurate,
it's not a bad way to celebrate this feast of the Church.

Some years a birthday nudges me to look back,
to ask again, "How did I come to this moment? Who are my people?"

On the Church's birthday it's worth noticing that Luke and John
remember differently how the Church got started.

When Luke writes down the story as he learned it,
everything happens in one day, the day of resurrection.

The empty tomb, the road to Emmaus, appearing to the disciples,
commissioning them, the ascension into heaven.
Everything happens in one amazing day.

But later, when Luke writes the Acts of the Apostles, he revises the story.
Now Jesus stays for 40 days before he ascends into heaven.
And a few days after that, on the Jewish feast of Pentecost,
the Holy Spirit descends on the disciples.

Luke tells how the Spirit drives the disciples out into Jerusalem,
this very public event where their fellow Jews welcome and receive
this miracle with wonder and awe. Thousands are baptized.



John, in his deeply personal, deeply mystical gospel
doesn't tell of an ascension.

“As the book closes, Jesus is still very much in the world he loves,
risen...teaching, encouraging.”¹

As John was taught the story, the Holy Spirit comes to his disciples
when Jesus breathes it onto each of them in a private, tender moment.

In John, the disciples were hiding in a locked room for fear of the Jews,
until Jesus breathes the Spirit on them,
and then they go on about their lives,
quietly performing acts of love and service
in a world that rejects them.



Now, if we were a group of historians, these differences would worry us.

If our identity were based on the perfection of historical documents,
we could fret and argue about whether Luke or John is “right.”

But faith doesn’t come from ancient manuscripts.

We are the Church, the community that gathers in the name
of Jesus Christ and shares the good news of his love.

We gather because the resurrection is an event in our own lives,
because the Holy Spirit has descended on us and sent us out into the world,
because the Holy Spirit has been breathed on us in quiet, private moments,
not because it happened 2,000 years ago to somebody else.

We don’t fret about different accounts of these actions.

Instead, we try to do the same things that Luke saw his church do
and John saw his: pray, witness, and serve in the name of Jesus.

¹ The Rev. Roger Ard, Xmas 1B 2009 sermon at St. Peter’s in Rome, GA.

Luke wrote his accounts when the Church was already 40 years old.
John wrote his in a different part of the Church that was a generation older.

Both local churches had been shaped by the death & resurrection of Jesus
and by the coming of the Holy Spirit,
but for both churches that was just the beginning of their stories.

They each had their own PARTICULAR victories and hardships.
The Spirit had long been working in their own lives.
The births, deaths, joys, and tragedies of life in each community of faith...
of course they remembered the stories differently.

And if you still wonder how this could be,
ask your parents about the day you were born.

Ask them about your early childhood.

See if their stories line up with each other's, or even with your memories.

And if you have a sister or brother, compare notes on your parents.
You might discover you were raised by very different people.

(And in case you're wondering, yes, I did indeed spend an entire week
with my parents and my sister and our families.

Whatever might you be implying?)



I'm bringing up all this talk about the differences in scripture
because we starting our summer Bible study today in Tisdale Hall,
and it's worth saying at the beginning that the Church
has always known the gospels remember things differently.
That's why the Church picked 4 of them as authoritative.

And we have always known history is complicated.

Your history, Jesus' history, certainly the 2,000 year history of the Church.

Anytime you look back & ask questions about where you come from,
you discover that some of the memories won't line up.

And you always find that people are...complicated.

On this Memorial Day weekend, when we honor those who gave their lives
in service to our country, memory is as vital as it is complicated.

And discovering inconsistencies, or questions we can't answer,
whether about the one we call Lord, or the country we love,
or even about the person you see in the mirror, is hard for some us.

But neither you, nor your faith, nor the Church, nor your country,
are defined by a birth story or a particular memory.

We are all defined by God, who created us, loves us, and calls us good.

You are defined by the fullness of the life you've lived,
not just the beginning of it,

by the prayers and the witness and the service you have made
in the midst of all your own failings and inconsistencies.

The image of Christ IS in you.

The dignity of every human being is YOUR dignity.



Other years a birthday doesn't call me to look back,
but to look around at the life I have now, and to think about the future.

Who am I today? What matters to me now? What is my purpose?

In college I had an English professor who taught me to be an Episcopalian.

Neal Prater would sit in his pew and rub his wife's shoulder
for the entire service, and he would say the Lord's Prayer
just THAT much louder than anybody else.

He was devoted to his wife in a way I've never forgotten.

He once told me he hated being the chair of the English department
because at that point in his life every faculty lunch
he had to attend was one more lunch he wouldn't
get to have with his beloved Marion.

It sounded romantic but it turned out to be prophetic.

Within 10 years of that conversation Marion was dead of cancer.
The devoted husband had become a widower, and still is 20 years later.

So what matters now? What is my purpose? Where am I headed?



Part of me gets nervous asking that question.

Part of me worries all of you will answer, "NOT THIS!"
and just walk out. But that's insecurity talking.

Y'all are here because what matters to you is not all that different
than what mattered to the disciples 2,000 years ago
and what mattered to this parish when it was founded 131 years ago.

You have had an experience of God's goodness in your life
and you want to share that with others
through love and service and worship.

So...what matters today? What is your purpose?



St. Paul tells the Corinthians about the gifts of the Spirit:

Wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, and all the rest.

But the most important thing, he says, is that the Spirit gives those gifts
as they are needed for the common good.

So even if there is this part of each of us that says,
“What’s important to me right now...is me!

Golf! The beach!

The finale of Succession!

(did I mention I was on vacation last week?)

I’m betting there’s a stronger impulse,
the impulse that brought you here today,
that is excited by even the possibility that there is a need
for YOU in the world that only you can provide.

Maybe it’s a small thing. Maybe only one person will know what you did.
But the world has a need for you,
for the gifts the Spirit has manifested in you.

The gift of compassion, or generosity, or companionship,
of moral courage, of kindness, forgiveness, steadfastness.

Maybe it will be a public witness, like the disciples who spilled out
into the city just like Luke remembered it.

And for others, maybe a quieter task,
more like the way John remembered it happening.

The Spirit is calling you. The Spirit is empowering you.
And the Spirit is waiting for us to say yes.

“Come, Holy Ghost, our souls inspire.”

Amen.