

Pentecost is the birthday of the church.

It is the day on which the odd assortment of folks who followed Jesus; with all their disagreements, faults and frailties received the Spirit of God and became **more than the sum of their parts.**

The Church was born.

**The Church was born, and the Spirit, if you will, was our Mother,** the one who gave us birth.

The Spirit, of course, is part of the mystery we call the Trinity, and as such is neither male nor female in the human sense. However, the *words* for ‘spirit’ in both Hebrew and Greek languages (*ruach, and pneuma,* respectively) are *feminine* words. And the Spirit does give life to the Body. So, in honor of Mothers’ Day, we are honoring that parallel.

**The Church, as I say, was born. But the church was not perfect:** not then, and never since then. It was the Spirit that gave them power to be more than the sum of their parts.

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**Ever since the first Pentecost, we have been struggling with how to BE the Church.** Specifically, I think we have struggled with how to be people of **Grace** while also being people of **Transformation.**

Whenever we fail (and we do this with alarming frequency) people say, **“you don’t practice what you preach.”**

“You don’t practice what you preach” is a devastating thing to say because Jesus made it very clear that preaching without practice is worse than empty- it is **hypocrisy.** It is an offense to God.

**But it is hard to BE the church,** because the criticism that we don’t practice what we preach is used in two different ways.

On the one hand, If the congregation is **judgmental**; if it is not forgiving, and kind to those who have tried to follow Christ and have failed; then it is said that we do not practice what Jesus preached about **Grace.**

But if the congregation is **no different from the toxic culture** in which we live, if our moral choices show no evidence of that Christ lives in us, if

we look away when we hurt one another, then it is said that we do not practice what Jesus preached about **Transformation**.

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I said last week that when I stumbled into the Church as an adolescent, **I was amazed at what I found there:** a place where people had a love for God and for each other.

- A place that, unlike the junior high world in which I lived, was **a safe place. You were accepted instantly**, no matter how unpopular you were, no matter what mistakes you had made: **grace** was extended to you.

- At the same time, **there was an expectation** that once you were here, you would also be part of making this a safe place. They asked us not to conform to the world, but to be **transformed** with God's help.

**Everyone who walks through our doors lives in a world that is at least as confusing and dangerous as middle school.** Lord knows the world can be a dangerous place that can break your heart and shatter your dreams. People come here searching for a place where the ground rules are different; **Where we practice what we preach.** Whatever else we do, we must ensure that this is a safe place. If it is not, no one will care what else we have to say.

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**in 1874, the Spirit brought this congregation into being**, and we are the inheritors of a long and wonderful history of God's presence made visible in blessing and service. We, and those who've gone before us, have **seen the Spirit bring grace and transformation** in this place.

I am particularly mindful of this having farewelled **3 beloved men** this week: Paul Mordy, Bill Newman, Dick Coffin. Each one's life was deeply touched by God in this place. **Each one was given a gift by the Spirit for the common good**, and they offered those gifts: gentleness, faithfulness, their music, their laughter, their ability to fix anything. And this Body of Christ is stronger as a result.

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**But like the early Church, this church is not perfect.**

About a year ago, people began to tell me stories, and I began to ask questions. With Jim's help it became clear to me that **over the last 35 years**, some painful mistakes have been made involving **marital infidelity**. Some of these events caused hearts to be broken, hastened the end of troubled marriages to an end. **Many people were not aware of this- but those who were, were very distressed**, because these painful mistakes

involved people at the center of our life: pastors, youth leaders, people we loved and trusted.

People divorced, people left, relationships changed.

**And as near as I can tell**, because it was so awkward, and because it was so painful, and because it involved people at the center, we could not talk about it except in the parking lot, or in side conversations.

**Ever since the first Pentecost, we have been struggling with how to BE the Church.**

**We are one Body.** Just as an illness or a growth can sap your strength whether you are aware of it or not, just as it can weaken you **whether you talk about it or not**, something like this can sap the strength of the Body. And generally, ignoring it does not help it heal.

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To tell you the truth, when I heard these stories, and the heartache that accompanied them, **I wept bitterly**, because I figured it was **the beginning of the end** of my pastorate here. The received wisdom is that churches, like families, sometimes have Secrets no one talks about, and the first person who talks about the secret generally gets tarred, feathered & run out of town.

So I gathered up all my courage, and I began talking with the Session about it last summer. **And my testimony is this: Once again, I have walked into the Church and been amazed at what I've found.**

**The Holy Spirit has been present with us, making us more than the sum of our parts.**

Instead of pointing fingers, blaming, or running screaming from the room, The elders have been like **a room full of really good Moms:** compassionate, and wise, and full of strength.

They have wrestled strenuously with **how to practice what we preach in situations like these.**

How do we show unconditional love in situations like these?

How do we help one another to heal?

What is our obligation to one another, and how can we live it out?

What do we do if this happens again??

**We are not done with solving these issues**, but they have taken two important steps. One is that they have adopted a document called "Life in the Community of Faith: **Standards of Ethical Conduct**", which is a beautiful document that **helps spell out how we intend to practice both the Grace and the Transformation that we preach.**

The other is that they have formed a task force to extend pastoral care in complicated situations. Something good is happening in this church.

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**Maybe this kicks up some old hurt, or anxiety, or sadness for you.**

Maybe there is some memory that you would like to heal, some pain you'd like to be free of. Maybe there is someone you'd like to forgive.

**The Spirit will help you if you ask.**

When you were a kid, did your mom ever fix the 'unfixable'? Mine did.

She glued the ceramic doll so that the seam didn't even show.

She intervened when I was sure I would hate my brother forever, and showed me a better way.

She saw me through the pain of having my tonsils out at age 21.

She faced my failure, my rage, my pain- and brought healing.

**The Spirit can do more than you think.**

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**Today we celebrate the birthday of the church,**

We celebrate the wind and flame and bells and chimes that inspire our hearts to outrageous hope. Because Pentecost was the birthday of **an imperfect church**, a church made up of unlikely and unpromising members, who had glaring faults and who fought with one another.

It was not a perfect place,  
they were not perfect people.

**But the Spirit came upon them, and made them more than the sum of their parts.**

The Spirit loves us like a good mom:

Loving us **unconditionally**, while at the same time **Expecting our best**.

Helping us practice what we preach about Grace, & also about Transformation.

Look around this place that we call home and be amazed: The Spirit dwells among us still.

Happy Birthday. Happy Mothers' Day. Thanks be to God.