

INTO THE FUTURE
Acts 2:1-21
Psalm 104:24-34, 45b
Romans 8:14-17
John 14:8-17 (25-27)

Jack, Jackson and Charlie—welcome to the Body of Christ and to the membership and mission of this congregation. Today you enter a new stage of life. Today marks a before and after point in your lives. Before, you were part of the church, because your parents had you baptized, brought you to Sunday school, and made sure you showed up for confirmation classes. But today, you affirmed your choice to be here, to be part of the community of faith. Today, you made your public profession of faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Going forward, your world is different. It may look the same and sound the same, but now you bring to each situation, each relationship, each decision the acknowledgment that you are not your own, but that you are Christ's men. Today marks the beginning of that new stage of life.

Today we also celebrate the church's birthday. You and the church now share a birthday and that is especially appropriate, because confirmation is not only about your faith in Jesus, but it is also about being the church.

The Pentecost story that Chris just read tells us about the giving of the Holy Spirit, the Advocate, the Spirit of Truth to Jesus' followers just as he had promised. It is the story of the beginning of the church, when those women and men came out from behind closed doors and went out into the world to share the good news of his death and resurrection. The Jesus movement would no longer be small gatherings of people, listening and learning from one man. It would be many men and women speaking, healing, baptizing, and carrying out Jesus' ministry all across the world.

It might be tempting to simply light candles, serve cake, sing "Happy Birthday" to the church and move on. That's what we have done for a long time, at least as long as I can remember. But I find myself thinking that this year is different, that we are entering a new era, a different time in the life of the church.

The church has been facing major disruptions for awhile. Our culture has changed and church is no longer a priority in many people's lives. Once upon a time, when two people met, they exchanged their names, spoke of their work and said where they went to church. Now church doesn't even come up. Methodist pastor, Stephen Bauman, reflects that "all religious institutions are

facing disruption in the current cultural whirlwind.”ⁱ Just 15 years ago, according to the Pew Research Center, Christians outnumbered “nones”—that is, people who described themselves as atheists or agnostics or nothing in particular. Christians outnumbered them by almost five to one. Just before the pandemic, that ratio was two to one. At that rate, with the nones climbing about 1 percent every two years, they will soon be the largest religious demographic in America.ⁱⁱ

But I suspect the pandemic has heightened that number. Covid forced us into lockdown and we, like all congregations, scrambled. We had to figure out how to do church when we couldn’t be together in person. Even now, when we can gather in person, more people worship with us on line than in the sanctuary—some Sundays three times more people. Don’t get me wrong. I am glad that all of you, who are watching, are doing so and I pray that you are being fed and renewed by worship. Someone asked me just last week if we plan to shut down the streaming of our service in an attempt to force people back into the sanctuary. “Of course not,” I said. “We want to reach people with the good news however we can.”

That said, however, the church is faced with a lot of questions. Will people eventually come back in person? How do we create a community between those in the sanctuary and those at home? What does it mean to be the body of Christ here and now?

Since its beginning, the church has had such questions. At the time of the first Pentecost, the followers of Jesus had experienced the presence of the resurrected Christ, and while they had heard his charge to witness to his resurrection and his promise to send the Holy Spirit, they weren’t sure what all of that meant. They didn’t know what, if anything, they were supposed to be doing. Their world was still marked by poverty, struggle, and the sound of Roman armor clanking in the streets of Jerusalem. Jesus had not been the kind of king they thought they needed. The future was uncertain. So they had hidden away and waited.

It was to this uncertain group, that the Spirit did indeed come. The Spirit, who swept across the chaotic void at creation, who gave courage and words to the prophets, who filled the womb of Mary, who descended on Jesus at his baptism—this same Spirit swept into that room, blew open the doors and drove those frightened people out into the world with news of the crucified and risen Christ. That potent Spirit empowered them to live the new life of love and compassion,

justice and service, which Jesus himself taught and modeled. And so the church was born.

Jack, Jackson and Charlie—you have chosen to join the church, which was born with fire and wind, with dramatic action and bold words. But the church has faced challenges and difficulty, too. Some day you will find it good to know that the church has gone through hard times, because there will be days when you, too, will find it difficult to know what God wants of you. You may feel like your world is falling apart or that God has abandoned you or, at the very least, isn't listening to your prayers. You may question what your future will be like or think you are unworthy to be called a follower of Christ. Your ancestors in the faith who huddled together in that room 2000 years ago would surely have welcomed you if you came to them with those feelings and questions, because it was the same for them. In fact, the folks sitting around you this morning also welcome you because we too know those feelings and wrestle with the same questions. We know what it is to be bewildered and worried and questioning as individuals and as the church.

It would be nice to know what to expect, to have blueprints for the future, to have clear answers for our lives and for the life of the church, but we don't. What we do have are some gifts to sustain us as we try to discern God's plan for us.

While we try to faithfully live into that future, we can emulate those first followers—we can pray. We are told they devoted themselves to prayer.ⁱⁱⁱ Prayer is the way we maintain our relationship with God, stay open to God's leading, discover God's guidance and support, and acknowledge our need for what only God can give. Prayer helps us to live in expectation that God will give what is needed for us to move forward into God's future. In the intimacy of prayer, we can turn away from thinking it all rests on us—success, fulfillment, perfection—and be remade as God's beloved children. Prayer connects and reconnects us to Christ's promise that even when things are about as terrible as they can be, that the Spirit is in us, that we are in the Spirit, and that nothing can remove us from the Spirit.

We have prayer and we also have each other. One of the little details given us about that first Pentecost is that “[Jesus's followers] were all together in one place.”^{iv} They stayed together and prayed together because Jesus told them to, and with the gift of the Holy Spirit, they discovered that their faith was nourished and nurtured in that community. They learned the difficult lessons of loving one another. They learned to share what they had, to help those who didn't have enough, and, together, to be joyful and generous.^v

One of the things that the pandemic shutdown has emphasized about our culture is its radical individualism. People go it alone. We work from the privacy of our homes. We see our physicians over the Internet. We have our groceries delivered, so we don't even interact with the cashiers. But our faith does not exist apart from community where we are called to deeper fellowship with Christ and one another.

We have prayer and we have each other and we have this feast. Jesus instituted what we call the Lord's Supper so that we might eat and drink with him, be renewed in our relationship with him and be united with everyone who gathers around his table, not just here and now, but in every place and time. It is also a reminder that we don't deserve this communion with him, but that it is a gift given to us out of love.

Jack, Jackson and Charlie—you have made a counter-cultural choice, one that many other people do not make. It is a sign that the Holy Spirit has been and continues to be at work in you. Cling to this promise that was declared at the time of your baptism, "You have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism and marked as Christ's own forever." Nothing can separate you from that promise.

People of God—you are the Church, also sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked as Christ's own forever. As we step into the unknown and unsettling future, we have the gifts we need to be faithful to our calling to carry out Christ's ministry, here and beyond these walls. Whatever the post-pandemic church may look like, whatever we may have to sacrifice, wherever we may have to go, whomever we are called to serve, whatever unknowns we may face, we can rest in the promise that God's Holy Spirit will empower us to witness to the love and grace of Jesus Christ.

ⁱ Stephan Bauman, "Every 500 Years," *Reflections*, Spring 2022.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Acts 1:14.

^{iv} Acts 2:1.

^v Acts 2:44-46.