

“THE ONCE AND FUTURE CHURCH,” A Sermon delivered by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey G. Drutchas, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, Michigan, May 15, 2016

Today is a time for celebration in our church life together. It's Pentecost, which is both a special day and a season in the Christian calendar. Some call it the “birthday of the church.” And not without reason. The Day of Pentecost recalls that time when Jesus' apostles and disciples experienced the need to get organized so that their faith in Jesus Christ might be better proclaimed and nurtured.

This Christian holiday is actually borrowed straight from the Jews. In fact, it was originally a Jewish spring harvest festival that usually followed fifty days after the Jewish Festival Passover, celebrating the deliverance of the Hebrew people from bondage in Egypt under the leadership of Moses. By the grace of God it also became the big turning point for the fledgling Christian community.

All of Jesus' apostles and disciples had faced a lot of trauma. First, they were witnesses to Jesus' brutal crucifixion, which was an embarrassment to them all because Romans reserved the cross for only the basest of criminals. Next, they were confronted by an empty tomb. It took some time for the apostles to realize and appreciate the emptiness of Jesus' grave was evidence of his resurrection. Thereafter, the apostles and disciples had to make sense of Jesus' unexpected reappearances in his resurrected state. Last, the resurrected Christ ascended into heaven, leaving them behind in a whole new way. For the apostles and disciples, it was another parting and another loss.

Jesus had always promised that the Holy Spirit would come to dwell in their midst when he was truly gone but his followers could not grasp what he exactly meant and what this would be like. That's why Pentecost is so important. It was a day of revelation and a promise fulfilled.

Earlier we read the account of the first Christian Pentecost from the Books of Acts of the Apostles. It describes to us how the apostles gathered in Jerusalem as good Jews to observe the Pentecost harvest festival. Suddenly, something like a wind sweeps through their midst, igniting them spiritually. Incredible as it sounds, the apostles and disciples see tongues of fire, emblems of purifying spirituality, dancing upon one another's heads. They simultaneously feel the spiritual impulse to testify about Jesus Christ to those who have ears to hear. What's more, bridging any language barriers between themselves and those who have come into Jerusalem from distant, foreign-speaking places for Pentecost, everything they say can be understood by everyone else.

In a moment that is almost funny, the Apostle Peter has to defend his fellow apostles against those who mistake the enthusiasm of the spiritual testimonials as some kind of drunkenness. Nobody has been drinking, Peter insists, since it's only mid-day. In a little speech, Peter, who grasps what is happening better than most, proceeds to explain that Jesus' apostles and disciples are touched by the Holy Spirit and that is the fulfillment of ancient Jewish scripture whereby it prophesies that as God's final kingdom approaches "Your sons and daughters will prophesy and your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams." (*Acts 2:17*)

What's important here is that Jesus' apostles and disciples emerge from that Day of Pentecost refreshed and renewed in their faith in Jesus as a risen savior who is going to return in power and glory to usher in the kingdom of God. Before they felt uncertain and were even demoralized. Now they are confident and emboldened, ready to share the promise of Christ with others. They also understand that for the sake of staying power until Christ comes again they need to form and shape a body of believers to provide mutual encouragement. This becomes especially important when Jesus' believers begin to realize that Christ is not going to return right away and that many men and women beyond the Jewish community also want the gift of salvation and aren't going to be welcomed in the Great Jerusalem Temple or the local synagogues where Jewish Christians still worship. The result is the whole idea of the church—a word that means "assembly" or "assembled."

There was nothing grand about the church founded at Pentecost. As a church, Christians in Jerusalem and elsewhere began to meet in any home of a member large enough to host them. However limiting this was, this "house church" arrangement, which some groups like the Amish still follow today, had the advantage of keeping the church undercover. It made it harder for Roman and Jewish authorities to monitor or persecute Christian activity. In time, however, the Christian community outgrew its house churches and needed larger, accessible places to gather for worship and other activities. By this time, also, Christianity had completely separated out from Judaism, particularly after the destruction of the Great Jerusalem Temple in 70 A.D. From then on out, the church grew in every sense. More and more people came to Christ. Church buildings multiplied and grew in size. The organization of the church as a group of believers also became more sophisticated and complex with leaders formally ordained as deacons, pastors, and bishops.

The Christian Church was further transformed and enlarged when the Roman Emperor Constantine declared that henceforth Christianity would be one of the received religions of his empire. Within a generation or so, anybody who was not Jewish was required to become Christian: paganism and polytheism were outlawed. This was the era when the

Nicene Creed was composed at the Great Council held in the town of Nicaea to teach the right essentials of faith. Church committees also decided what books should be excluded from or included in the Christian Bible and the calendar that good Christians should follow in observing Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost. To this day, we are the heirs and beneficiaries of organizational decisions made back then to strengthen the church and to ensure that Jesus Christ would continue to have a vital witness until his return.

Of course, there is always the danger of too much organization that can stifle the spirit and waylay the ministry that Jesus Christ intended for us. That was Martin Luther's concern when he complained about a top-heavy Catholic Church and launched what became the Protestant Reformation five hundred years ago. Although trained as a Roman Catholic monk and theologian, Luther sought to reform the Christian church so that it was truer to the original teachings of Jesus Christ and more responsive to the authentic spiritual needs of his followers. The church was here to serve the God's people; not the other way around. Aided by the recent invention of moveable type which made bibles relatively inexpensive to publish, Luther also proclaimed that the Bible, not the Pope, should be the ultimate authority for the church and that all church members needed to take more personal responsibility for their faith.

Luther's call to reform the church led to dozens of Protestant spinoffs. Those spin-offs, which we call denominations, survive today as Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, Reformed, Nazarene, Pentecostals, and our own United Church of Christ. However, as we still await God's final kingdom today, Christ's church faces further change. Just as the Roman Empire and the Protestant Reformation impacted the way the church was organized, we see a cultural revolution going on, aided by the latest technologies, that is altering life-styles and fostering new expectations for the ways Christians do church.

Consider these facts. Instead of viewing the existence of many Christian denominations as a positive flowering of faith amid the diversity of God's people, younger Christians see denominationalism as an evidence of disobedience to Christ and a failure of Christians to get along. Thus, we see the current popularity of so-called "non-denominational" churches.

Likewise, fewer people seem interested in traditional church doctrine and theology that for century upon century have shaped the life of the church. Raised on "sound-bites" that suits a faster-paced world, our younger generations often prefer all faith-talk to be kept as simple, straight-forward, and succinct as possible. This is even reflected in the choice of music whereby one and two line praise songs, repeated over and over again, are preferred to longer hymns that tell stories or carry deeper theological messaging.

Also notable are the preferences for the visual image over the written word and for sound over silence. Historically, Protestant churches have kept themselves pretty bare so as to minimize any distractions from the read and spoken word of the gospel. Since the Vatican II Council of the 1960s, even the Roman Catholic Church has followed suit, stripping down most of its sanctuaries to make them plainer. However, catering to the tastes of younger people some of new Christian churches have added humongous screens for the projection of a constant stream of visual images. And they have almost made themselves over into entertainment venues in order to catch and retain the fickle attention of their congregations used to eye-catching displays in every other aspect of their lives.

The rationale for all this is that nothing succeeds like success. To be able to minister to men and women you have to get them in the door, which is especially challenging at a time when folks are so individualistic in their outlook that they distrust traditional institutions and question their authority to provide moral guidance and direction.

Friends, I am not in agreement with a lot of the cultural trends that we see sweeping our world and nation today. I worry about the growing superficiality of our culture which, in the words of a classic hymn, seems to be “rich in things and poor in soul.” But I am pragmatic enough to know that organizations that don’t acknowledge what is happening and don’t bend at least a little with the times are more prone to break down and fall apart. And I am faithful enough to know that God is not only to be found in churches like our own but also out in the larger world where we see change happening so rapidly. It is entirely possible that some of the changes unfolding in the world today actually serve God’s purposes in ways that we don’t yet understand and may actually represent the Holy Spirit at work.

I am sure that there were some Christians who thought that leaving houses churches behind to build stand-alone buildings was a huge mistake. From recorded history I know that that there were Roman Catholics who believed that the changes and innovations that Martin Luther introduced to Christian worship and church life were of the devil. Yet time has shown otherwise. What this underscores for me is that in any age there is not just one way to do church and to be a church. Our expression of love for God and love for one another, which are ultimate essentials of our faith, can take many different forms. What counts is that we worship Jesus Christ with integrity, bringing our best to his service. The measure of our success as we minister together in Jesus’ name lies in the commitment and enthusiasm for Jesus that we are able to encourage in the hearts and minds of those who cross the threshold of this church.

Congregation, I think we know who we are as a church in Jesus Christ. I also think we know who we want to continue to be. Though it may defy more popular trends, this is a body of Christ that is more concerned about serving than being served in living out our faith and that prizes thought as much as feeling and emotion when it comes to worshipping God. We don't mind a little noise in worship but we also respect the divine admonition and instruction: "Be still and know that I am God." In other words, amid whatever songs we sing and whatever other music we play, we believe in the value of quiet time for worshipful prayer and meditation too. I hope that these are the things will never change for us until we hear God telling us to do otherwise. At the same time, however, how important it is that we as a worshipping church also adjust and adapt to our times, especially when we can do so without morally and spiritually compromising, let alone sacrificing, what is important and essential in our Christian life together. Here, just like on that first Christian Pentecost, we need to trust the Holy Spirit to guide us in making choices and decisions for our present and future.

In the calendar of the Christian Church Pentecost is treated as an entire season that takes us from the last day of Easter to the first day of Advent. Extending over six and a half months, it's actually the longest season in the Christian calendar. Historically, it's been a time when faithful Christians are called to build up the church as the living body of Christ as the first Christians did after their experience in Jerusalem. With our "Room with a View" nearing completion and a Vision Team composed of church members looking at ways that we might respond to the needs of our day and enhance our faith walk together, we all should give thought to how we can together bring our best to worshipping Christ in a way that makes our ministry as appealing to others as well.

Our future in Christ begins today. Keeping true to the past, may we also be open to the leading of the Holy Spirit and whatever new and different things that the Spirit calls us to do. **Amen.**