
It All Begins with Spirit

Acts 2

The book of Acts is a continuation of the Gospels following the events surrounding Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. By the second chapter of Acts, we get the account of what we often refer to as the "birthday" of the church. In fact, most years here at PCL, and in many church traditions, a birthday cake is prepared and red balloons are set out on Pentecost Sunday to symbolize this. And though the Spirit didn't first show up at Pentecost—and while God had certainly been long at work in the people who were already in community there—something indeed was beginning... something was being inaugurated by the Spirit in what would take shape as the early Christian church.

We are now quite distant from that time and place, and yet Spirit-led communities should work to reclaim that spiritual heritage—like doing ancestry work. Have you ever done 23andMe, ancestry.com, or one of the DNA kits, and uncovered some fascinating story from your family's history that makes you go about your day in a different way?—Maybe you found that you are descended from royalty, or from some famous character of history, or maybe you discovered your ancestors were slave owners, or crooks. Your history can influence how you go about the present.

As a Christian community, Pentecost is our origin story. Now, we don't know for sure but we can speculate that the formation of the community in Acts took place around 33 AD, with the book of Acts likely written in the early 60's AD. This would mean that we are coming up on the 2,000th birthday of the early Christian Church. We will need lots of candles for that cake!

This year, we are also celebrating another significant event—the 250th birthday of our nation. When that day had come in 1776, they too were all together in one place. Two hundred and fifty years ago, in the heat of a Philadelphia summer, it was a group of delegates representing the thirteen scattered colonies

that had gathered in a room to put conviction and ink to parchment and imagine a new way of organizing community. It began as a faint yet daring dream, of life beyond the subjugation of a king. And finally, on July 4, 1776, the Declaration of Independence announced to the world that a new nation was being born. We might see our nation's origin story as another movement of the Spirit. The Scriptures say, "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." The inverse of that is also true: Where there is freedom, there is the work of the Spirit. And our Independence was a decisive movement away from empirical bondage and toward freedom, a movement that *also* began by sons and daughters prophesying a more expansive way, a movement that was *also* set in motion by young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams.

Two origin stories for us today. I want to draw out and appreciate some important distinctions between these birthday celebrations, which affect us, the Presbyterian Church in Leonia, as an American Christian Church in the year 2026. For one, in the formation of a nation, everything is structured through documents. Oh the number of documents! Only 10 years following that Declaration, the Constitution of the United States formalized all the negotiated principles and institutional orders which gave a framework and an identity to govern those original colonies. There were endless documents and treatises, not to speak of the public debates and political proceedings.

Do you know how many words, and laws, and principles you need to have to start a nation? By contrast, the church begins not with documents and negotiations but with *Spirit* — wind, fire, disruption, embodiment, community and relationship. Let that settle on you for a second. The church does not begin with a constitution, a creed, a building, or even a strategy. There were no bylaws, no committees. The church was not *organized*, it was *animated*.

Do you know how many beliefs you must have to start a religion? So much would need to be set in place to begin a religion. But Jesus said, give me a minuscule amount of faith, of love, as small as a tiny mustard seed, and you can move mountains. Give me a person moved by the experience of compassion, of empathy, and that can bring heaven on earth. Before anything else, it all began with an experience. Picture again the scene: A violent wind rushes in, unwieldy fire appears, languages are multiplied and spoken in the irony of a chaotic yet harmonious polyphony, barriers collapse, fear dissolves, strangers miraculously understand one another.

One commentator said: “Without Pentecost, we are just a people who tell Jesus’ story; With Pentecost, we are a people who live into Jesus’ story.” There is no small difference in that distinction. One is mere story-telling. The other is animating an inner reality through action. The early Christian church would eventually become an institution of documents. We didn’t get out of the first century before treatises of various types, like the Didache, were written. These gave some structure to the Church’s daily life, beliefs, and practices. Around that same time baptismal creeds were developed that gave language and liturgy around the professions of belief for those being baptized. Much of this would form the basis of the Apostles Creed which was developed over those early centuries but more formalized by the 4th century, with today’s version already concretized by the 8th century.

By that time, Christianity had become the official state religion of Rome, when Emperors Constantine the Great and Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, which granted religious freedom to all citizens and ceased government persecution of Christians. And Christianity was a full-on Religion with all the backing of the state.

So, you see, it didn’t take long for the church to enter the world of bureaucracy. It didn’t take long to feel the need for its own constitutions and hierarchies . . . to determine its doctrine, its domain and geography. But, my friends, before human fear and the need for control institutionalized our common faith into a Religion, we have to remember that it all started with Spirit, a movement of experience. Experience becomes unwieldy. Constitutions are established to create boundaries to box-in experience, to outline where the power lies. But the Church, in the power of the Spirit, is commissioned from the beginning to be a boundary-breaking enterprise. Yes, the Spirit will come upon us in power, but we don’t need more institutional power in the Church. The Church needs to rediscover the kind of power that is given away, not hoarded.

For decades now, the Christian church in the United States has been experiencing a steady decline in membership and attendance. This is part of a wider societal resistance to institutional influence in general. According to recent studies from the Pew Research Center, in 2007, 78% of Americans identified as Christian. That’s still a vast majority. By 2014, that number had fallen to 71%, and today it stands at around 62%. Meanwhile, the number of religiously unaffiliated Americans — sometimes called the “nones” — has risen from 16% to

nearly 30% in that same span. Yet, I don't think that this necessarily means people have stopped searching for meaning or spiritual connection. They would call themselves "Spiritual But Not Religious". And it's the fastest-growing group in America's spiritual landscape. This underscores how people are still hungry for experiences of awe, purpose, justice, community, and the sacred, but often feel alienated from organized religion and traditional church structures. I find this to be a hopeful trend. The Spirit is still at work.

When our community looks at the Presbyterian Church in Leonia, I hope they see the Spirit at work. I hope they see more than a building and a structure, but a movement that defies norms and expectations.

It can be argued that the birthday of the church isn't Pentecost, when the Spirit rested as tongues of fire on each one present in that place... I think the birthday of the church is when they made the decision to leave that place and put feet to their spiritual empowerment. You see, the spirit enabled them but it didn't force them to go. It gave them the power to do the work but it didn't make them do it. They still had to choose to act in that power. It immediately emboldens Peter. Timid Peter, who denies Christ throughout the Gospels, who continued to miss the mission of Jesus. That Peter—goes and preaches probably the best New Testament sermon this side of The Beatitudes and ignites the church into existence.

Some say that we are currently experiencing a movement deeper than politics, religion, economics, or culture wars—that there is something happening beneath all the noise of modern life, something tied to the very meaning of life. And while we grasp some place to stand, some stability, I believe that the church is simultaneously being called into a destabilization of its life and ministry.

Peter's sermon addressed the disorienting experience that was happening in that place. He said: "these [people] are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning." As an aside—I think we need to stitch that on throw pillows for our pews, or have it as a byline on our church sign: "We are not drunk, it's only 10:30am in the morning, and we are filled with the Spirit." What do you think? People in our time, will only grow increasingly skeptical of the institutionalism of the Church. Having more divisions and insulation won't help church growth. I believe that comes from continuing to find ways to break boundaries. It might look a little unorthodox. It could look like a holy

disruption. It might mean we need to lose our religious decorum every now and then, and risk looking like the weird ones on the block.

What can we take away from the chaos of Pentecost? I think its most poignant message is that it all began with Spirit. That is the challenge to us: To find our way back. Church, may it be so. Amen.