

June 12, 2011 – Penetcost
A New Day

Gracious God May these words be your words of bold love, Amen

I attended a retreat where we were asked to talk about our birth stories. Our speaker pointed out that our birth stories tell us and others a bit about who we are. One person shared that she was 2 weeks past her due date when she was born and has been late for everything since. On the other hand, one of the men in the group was born in the car on the way to the hospital. He has found himself impatient, always wanting to tell folk to hurry up all of his life. Another was born pre-mature and had to fight for her life for months. She is one of those people who will not back down from a fight. A screamer for the first 3 weeks of his life, can't help but vocalize everything. Another's mother who was very sick now emanates compassion. Our stories of our birth do in fact tell us and our world a bit about who we are. This shapes us.

Think for just a moment – what story have you heard all of your life about how you were born? How did that impact you as you grew and changed?

Today we celebrate the church's birth. We sing Happy Birthday. We blow noise makers, put up streamers, and blow out candles. We dance and sing for joy. Where has the church been and where is it going? It began as a small group of perplexed disciples. The first churches lived under persecution. The church became legal and turned the tables and became a persecutor. Even then, it grew, did and does incredible ministry. The church, universal is struggling right now. Mega churches grow as small churches die. It's time to go back to our beginnings and look at the church's birth story, and ask how it challenges us.

The church began with wind and fire. It began with a small group of disciples gathered for Morning Prayer waiting for SOMETHING to happen. A mighty wind comes and sends everything flying. It unsettles everything. Anything not anchored down is at risk. The morning laundry disappears into the sky, small children are held onto by parents for dear life. Women try to hold their skirts down. Fruit comes rolling off of tables at the market. The streets were full of people who had come to Jerusalem from all over the world to celebrate the harvest festival of Pentecost. They hear the most amazing thing. The disciples speak in languages that the people on the street can understand. How can a man from one part of the world understand the words of a man from another? The scene was wild and confusing. Someone must have been drinking.

The Peter, always sure and unsure Peter, the man who ran scared at the crucifixion, stands up, filled with the Holy Spirit, bold and self assured and begins to preach. This is the church's birth story. What does this story tell us?

1. The early church was full of movement. It demanded that people be risk takers. It transformed people who were scared and unsure to bold proclaimers of Christ. The church emboldens us to be on the move. We have gotten comfortable in our churches. But the Holy Spirit calls us to move.
2. The mighty wind of the spirit knocked down barriers. Any division between races, clans, tribes, nations had been erased. They were now one. The birth of the church was expansive, all inclusive, welcoming, inviting, laying down of old battles. Yet today many of our churches have drawn a line between "us" and "them". Many denominations have spent whole conferences deciding whether "certain people" are "compatible with Christian teachings and the scripture." My brothers and sisters, the wind of the Holy Spirit blows where it will and it blows through the spirits of our brothers and sisters of all nations, backgrounds, orientations, all who are aching for Christ. Who are we to judge? Fling the doors and windows wide open and welcome all in.
3. The people's hearts were set on fire that day. Through the Holy Spirit they took on the challenge of Christ's ministry that could have possibly led to their persecution. It wasn't like they had a membership card that was stamped on Sundays at worship. They lived their faith. There was a lifestyle of sharing

food with the hungry, offering compassion, touching people's lives in profound ways. Does our faith permeate every aspect of our lives? Or do we have a membership card that we stuff back into our wallet and back pocket until the next Sunday? The birthing church demanded more.

4. The birth of the early church was unsettling. Anything that wasn't pinned down went flying. The work of the church is to be the Great Disturber as it demands justice. I love our scripture from Numbers. In that scripture it talks about when the Holy Spirit rested upon the people in the camp, it caused them to prophecy. Others came to Moses and said "make them STOP!" Moses's reply – "Could it be that all God's people were prophets." The church, empowered by the Holy Spirit, is to be – as Martin Luther Kind said, "The headlights NOT the tail lights" of society. We are called to be prophetic....To see visions, dream dreams. Some will say, "Make them stop!", but we can't. We are called to be a true community in the midst of a "me first society". In a world that pushes the church to the edge, we are called to minister to "the least of these". We are called to an acute awareness for opportunities to do ministry.

An ice storm in central Nebraska left hundreds and hundreds of people without electricity. The power company sent staff out to repair the lines. They set up in a church parking lot. That church provided warm home cooked meals to all who worked on the power lines daily. Soon they found folks slipping into the chapel to pray at breaks. For the work was cold, hard, long hours, and mistakes could easily be made. Spiritual and physical food for servants who would provide light. That is the church being the church.

In downtown Atlanta there was a small church – in its day thousands had attended church there – but recently it would pray month to month to keep the lights on. Homeless people would come in to find a place to sleep. At one point they decided to instead of inviting them out; to invite them in. They began to get to know the men living on the streets in their neighborhood, inviting them to church and to potlucks. One night a council, led by the Holy Spirit, and against good sense, they decided to open a homeless shelter. They now have 100 guests every night. They have showers, lockers, and counseling. That is the church being the church.

A congregation goes to Florida after hurricane Wilma to put up sheet rock in homes being rebuilt. They discover in a new way what it means to be brothers and sisters in Christ as they fall in love with the families with whom they worked. That is the church being the church.

The church was born out of a small group of perplexed disciples. The Holy Spirit rested upon them and shook their whole community up. On this Birthday of the Christian Church, we have to ask what choices she will make.

Will she set back in her lazy boy rocker, get comfortable and forget about the world outside of her four walls? Or will she develop new muscles, new vision, new energy... Will she open up all the doors and windows and step out, and let the Spirit blow where it will:

- Breaking down barriers
- Sending things flying
- Bringing healing
- Being a voice of hope

Since WE are the church, it is up to us to answer that question. May the Holy Spirit rest upon us and may we become bold.