

## **From the Pulpit of Trinitarian Congregational Church...**

Sunday, May 24, 2015

Preacher: Rev. Julie Olmsted

Scripture: John 15: 9-17

Sermon: The Church: Institution or Movement

In seminary, one question I had on an exam was the following: Is the Church an institution or a movement? Explain. You wouldn't think one question could make a big difference in someone's life, but this one did for me. It set me on a path of inquiry that remains as vital now as it did then (2005). I want to explore this question with you today, on Pentecost.

Jesus, as you all know, was a Jew. He lived, worshipped and taught in the context of his Jewish faith and tradition. When he went back home to live with God, those who continued his teachings and claimed to follow him were Jewish as well. Jesus did not plan to leave his faith; he operated within it and ministered to those within it. When he left the world, his spirit began to flow through and among his disciples; we see this revealed in a radical way with today's scripture. After Pentecost things evolved because of a few committed individuals being open and responding to, not an institution (the Jewish faith or the church), but to that Spirit. "The church" as it is called and referred to today, did not come around till much later in history. The church was definitely a movement.

In Acts 10:9-19 Peter has a vision of God being no "respector of persons." When Peter preached to the household of Cornelius, which was a gentile household, all believed "and were saved." When he later had the vision of the giant sheet coming down from heaven with all manner of animals, along with the invitation to "eat," that was the work of the Spirit. When Paul spoke to the very young church at Galatia, he strongly objected to the idea that people had to be circumcised and convert to Judaism before they could become Christian. Why? What was his point? His point was that it was a matter of spirit that folks become part of the body of Christ. His point was that it was a matter of faith that people come into the fold of the Good Shepherd. Here is where we see the idea lifted up "in Christ there is no East or West, no Jew or Greek, no male or female. You and I are here, not because of the church as institution, but as movement, as Spirit.

In the early days of the church people met in their homes. There were no cathedrals; there were no historic worship spaces (outside the Jewish Synagogue). People once had to hide the fact that they were Christian. If two people met on the road, one of them might draw half a fish on the dusty road. If the other person drew the other half of the fish (completed it), then they knew they had met a kindred spirit; they had met a fellow Christian. It was a movement that was led by the spirit, to be sure. There were prayer gatherings that brought people closer, that healed and inspired more people to join the church (this “movement” of the Spirit), and that made this thing called Christianity a foundational force that would impact the world for the rest of all time.

Before the year 325, Christianity had no home, to speak of. If you were a Christian you could be killed. Of course that was a bad thing. However, it was a very high and noble calling, to be martyred for the sake of the church. When Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity things changed dramatically. No longer was it dangerous to say, “I am Christian.” But something happened to the spirit; it was now contained, packaged and built into the framework of society. It became required to be a Christian. Cathedrals were erected and a whole hierarchical structure was put into place for clergy. (Can you imagine a bishop Jesus?) It was the spirit that was in danger now.

Remember the time when Jesus went with the disciples to the mountain to pray? Remember when Jesus was transfigured (white light all around), and Moses and Elijah were also present? Remember what Peter wanted to do? He wanted to build a memorial! He was so excited about what happened that he wanted to freeze it in time. Have you ever had that kind of thing happen? You just had such a wonderful time. Everything was magical. And what you want to do is find a way to make it permanent. It’s human nature. I know that when I have a really good day (energy-wise) I will sometimes sit and try to figure out, “What did I do? How can I bottle this, do it again?” I always want to figure out what was it that I did so that I can repeat it. This is the opposite of faith. This is control. This is the shadow side of the church. Everything in this world has a shadow. It is the nature of the world. If things take up space they will have a shadow. It’s physics. But it’s also life. So, the church has a dark side and we all know it. What are some of the components of “the dark side” of the church? Rigidity. Gossip. Competition. Greed. Hypocrisy. Smallness. Fear. Judgment. Just to name a few. The Catholic Church has struggled with its dark side for quite some time. So has the Mainline Protestant Church. And the Evangelical Church has had its problems. That’s why we need to be awake; always stay awake. The church as institution, like marriage, can be a wonderful thing. But you don’t go home at night to an institution. You go home to a partner, a friend and a possibility of happiness and harmony. In a marriage things need tending and watching. In the church that is also true. The church’s integrity always needs tending and watching. The tendency to want

to “freeze things,” never change, or refuse to look is always there. (That’s why I’m so evangelical...to keep things alive.)

So, today is the church’s birthday. And we celebrate her goodness and her spirit that started it all. Mainly we celebrate the possibility of spirit moving us all in wonderful directions.

We all love traditions in the church. (What traditions do you love?) But the tradition should never eclipse the spirit. The Spirit surprises. The Spirit moves us from darkness to light, from chains to freedom, from mourning to dancing, from conflict to peace. The Spirit is the third person of the Trinity (and next week is Trinity Sunday!). The Spirit keeps things alive and moving. The spirit keeps us dancing through life, in a (hopefully) somewhat graceful manner.

Did you know that mainline protestants are sometimes called “The frozen chosen?” Because we like to keep things predictable, familiar and contained. But, the church must have movement. That’s why we stand up and then sit down. (Ever wonder why we do that?) That’s why we feel moved to clap from time to time. The service itself is designed to keep the spirit flowing. We used to have a plumber come to our house. The name of the company was “Let it Flow.” Isn’t that a great name for a plumber? Because a house’s plumbing needs to flow. When things are stopped up they don’t flow. Things don’t work at all. This is true for a house. It is true for a person. And it is certainly true for the church. When you and I do the same things over and over and we actively resist any change at all and we complain when people don’t do things the way they have always been done, or the way they used to do them, then the spirit is not going to show up. So the church must move. Just because we have a beautiful building doesn’t mean that that is who we are. We are not this building. We are the church. WE. You and I. I am grateful for this building, we all love this building, but the building without the spirit is cold, unreal and ineffective.

So, Happy Birthday, Church. Let it flow. Let’s give up trying to control or predict everything. Let breezes flow through. Raise your hands if you are willing to let spirit into your life. Raise your hands if you are willing to be surprised by the Holy Spirit today. Not knowing is not bad. It’s actually exciting. Because in not knowing, in giving up control we can be led to new heights and new possibilities for the church. Creativity, expansion, beauty and a bit of something unusual and miraculous could occur. Let’s be ready, let’s be open; let’s be moved. Come, Holy Spirit, Come.