

## HAPPY BIRTHDAY, CHURCH!

Today is Pentecost! The word literally means “fiftieth day” because this experience took place fifty days after Easter. This was the time for the Jewish Feast of Weeks that is mentioned in Leviticus 23:15-21. This was the commemoration and celebration of the giving of the law at Sinai. So, today our scripture tells us that the people were gathered in Jerusalem for this festival which took place fifty days after Easter and they had this amazing experience of the Holy Spirit. All of the disciples who were gathered had that experience, not just the “saintly” ones or the “good” ones who knew how to pray well. It was a universal experience for all the disciples that helped not only connect with God’s Spirit but also with those who were around them speaking in different languages. But of course there were those who didn’t understand this experience of the Spirit of God and who accused the disciples of being drunk. After all, if you get too excited about your faith and start telling others about how God is working in your life, there is a good chance people might misunderstand you. But we are thankful to God that the power of the Holy Spirit and its dance in the lives of the disciples was stronger than any limitations and criticisms. Today, our message comes from a story written by Ann Weems about the power of the Holy Spirit as it moves in the life of a community of faith.

Narrator: *There was once a church that had only party rooms: the Session’s Party Room, the Music Party Room, the Feasting Party Room, the Do Justice Party Room, the Love Mercy Party Room, the Touch Lepers Party Room. In the center of the building a large round room with an altar and a cross: God’s Party Room. There was in the church an air of festivity and brightness that could not be denied. The people outside the church pointed their fingers and shook their heads*

Choir member: **“Something should be done about that church.”**

Narrator: *They were especially upset when they saw that the members wore party hats and smiles both inside and outside the church. Other congregations came to take a look and were shocked when they saw this church having so much fun during a worship service, snapping their fingers and dancing. They screamed,*

Choir: **“Sacriligious.”**

Narrator: *But the people in the church just smiled at them and went right on doing things like taking people in wheelchairs to the park and playing ball with them. When everybody else was collecting canned goods for the poor, this church bought pizza and marched right into dingy, dirty, paint-peeling apartments and sat down to eat with the tenants. They held picnics for the nursing home, and old men ran races while the congregation stamped their feet in applause. It was at one of these picnics that some of the members climbed up on the roof and shouted*

Voice from the back: **“Good News!”**

Narrator: *But one of the outsiders said,*

Choir member: **“Now we can get them for disturbing the peace.”**

Narrator: *The police arrived with sirens, ready for the arrest, but came out two hours later wearing party hats and smiles. One Sunday afternoon, the entire congregation met at the jail and passed out flowers to the prisoners. The following week after bread and wine and much laughter at the Lord’s Table, the people went to the hospital and asked to see the dying patients. They held their hands and mopped their brows and spoke to them of life. The crowd shouted,*

Choir: **“Disgraceful!”**

Choir Member: **“They must be stopped.”**

Narrator: *So the crowd appealed to the governing body of the denomination, and this committee of respected church people went to see for themselves. The committee asked the church,*

Chairperson (from lectern): **“Do you deny the charges of heresy? Do you deny that you’ve mocked the church and the Lord?”**

Narrator: *The people of the church looked into the stern red faces and smiled at them. They held out their hands to the committee and led them to the Birthday Cake Party Room. There on a table sat a large cake decorated beautifully in doves descending and red flames and words that read: Happy Birthday, Church! The people began cutting cake and blowing up balloons and handing out party hats to the committee members. The chairperson cried,*

Chairperson: **“Wait! Wait! Can’t you take anything seriously?”**

Voice from the back: **“We take our commitment to God very seriously indeed.”**

Chairperson: **“You don’t take it seriously at all! You have parties and wear silly hats and blow up balloons and sing and dance and have fun. Do you call that commitment?”**

Narrator: *The people smiled at the chairperson and asked him if he’d like a glass of wine. The chairperson hit his fist on the table and said:*

Chairperson: **“I don’t want wine, and I don’t want birthday cake. We’re here to reprimand you. We’re here to show you that you are wrong. Can’t you be serious?”**

Voice from the back: **“We are! We are asking you take communion with us.”**

Chairperson (almost screaming): **“With birthday cake? Outrageous!”**

Voice from the back (while walking to the front): **“Outrageous? We ask you to sit at our table and sup with us. God gave the Holy Spirit to believers, and that is something to celebrate! It’s an occasion for a party. We are celebrants of the gift of Life. We are community. We are God’s church. Why are your faces red when we are trying to do justice and love mercy? Why do you shake your fists at us when we are trying to discover the hurting and begin the healing? We are overjoyed that we can be the church, a community of people, who are many, yet one – who are different, but who walk together and welcome any who would walk with us. When we weep there is someone to weep with us and to affirm us and to take us to a party. When we see injustices, we must be about God’s business of freeing the oppressed. When we are faithless, we have God’s promise for forgiveness. Isn’t it remarkable that we can be God’s good news? Is it any wonder we have a church full of party rooms? There is so much love to celebrate!”**

Narrator: *The committee stared at the people, and the people moved closer to them and put their arms around them. The committee chairperson stepped up to the table and sliced a piece of birthday cake, took a bite, and laughed out loud. He began slicing and passing it out. When the wine was poured and the hands were held, the chairperson raised his glass and said,*

Chairperson: **“There is so much Love to celebrate! Happy Birthday, Church!”**

[Faith in Action: attached]

## FAITH IN ACTION

In his Spiritual Exercises, St. Ignatius (1491-1556) urged that all be taught the Examen, a daily examination of our deepest feelings and desires. He called these feelings our consolations (what connects us with God, others and ourselves) and desolations (what disconnects us). He believed that God would speak to us through these feelings and desires. It's not surprising that this saint felt so strongly about the Examen -- this prayer practice changed him from a wild soldier to a pilgrim walking barefoot to Jerusalem. The Examen helps us:

- Acknowledge sad or painful feelings and hear how God is speaking to us through them.
- Overcome a pessimistic outlook by encouraging us to notice the good in each day.
- Tell the truth about who we truly are and what we need, rather than who we think we should be.
- Become aware of seemingly insignificant moments that ultimately can give direction for our lives.

**Preparation:** You may wish to light a candle. Do whatever helps you to experience God's loving presence with you. Take a few deep breaths. Breathe in God's love, and when you breathe out, fill the space around you with it.

### STEP ONE

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are most grateful or where you experienced God's presence.

- If you could relive one moment, which one would it be?
- When were you most able to give and receive love today?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so good.

Breathe in the gratitude you felt and receive life again from that moment.

### STEP TWO

Ask God to bring to your awareness the moment today for which you are least grateful or where you felt God to be absent.

- When were you least able to give and receive love?
- Ask yourself what was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult.
- Relive the feelings without trying to change or fix it in any way.

Take deep breaths and let God's love fill you just as you are.

### STEP THREE

Be grateful for all that you have experienced.