

"YOU AND YOUR CHURCH"

INTRODUCTION

You may have already noticed from the heading on the bulletin that today is PENTECOST. Someone has suggested that as far as the Christian is concerned there are three great days in the year - CHRISTMAS, EASTER, and PENTECOST. We know what Christmas is, and we know what Easter is - but PENTECOST - what in the world is Pentecost? The word "Pentecost" certainly doesn't tell us very much. The word probably suggests to the average modern American words like "Pentagon" - and he knows that it has something to do with either the word "five" or "fifty". And if he takes the trouble to look it up in the dictionary, he will find that it means fifty days after Easter. This gives us very little clue, however, to the deeper meaning of a day which is in the same class with Easter and Christmas.

Occasionally one hears Pentecost referred to as the "Birthday of the Christian Church". Now we are coming a little closer to the profound meaning of this day. Actually it is rather difficult to put your finger on the exact day on which the church was born. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that it is the day on which the followers of Jesus were given the power to continue his ministry in the world. Earlier in the service you heard the Biblical account of what took place on this occasion - how they were gathered together in an upper room in Jerusalem, how they were suddenly possessed by a power far greater than themselves, a power that enabled them to do things that they never thought they would be able to do, and how from that experience they went out into the world to continue his ministry - to live for it and to die for it. We are their successors. And on this particular Sunday in the year when we pause to remember how the church began, I have chosen to share with you some thoughts concerning church life today - in our own time, in our own land.

DEVELOPMENT

Most of you have come here to this particular church today because it is your church. The majority of you are members of it, you belong to it and in a way it belongs to you. One or two of you may have been baptized in this church, and later confirmed in it. Some of you were married in it: others of you hope to be. Some of you have been part of this church through the years of a long and fruitful life. It may be that your children were reared in it so that its walls are saturated with associations of every kind and description. The building itself may speak to you of the past - memories of days gone by and of people who are no longer present. A great many of you have discovered this church recently, when you came to the city from some other part of the country. You've found something here that has apparently been filling a need in your life - fellowship, spiritual nourishment - and you have been drawn back here.

Whether you belong to the church or not, all of you are here because in one way or another you have come to realize that you need what the church has to offer - otherwise you would not have come. For one thing - you need a place to worship. True, you can worship God anywhere and everywhere for God is everywhere, but we don't! There are too many distractions in the open field, in the mountains, by the sea. For most Christians, it is in a place like this where everything is designed to make one conscious of God's presence - in a place like this where you are more apt to experience God. You need a place to worship.

You need a place to feed your soul. Your body is often stuffed, sometimes overstuffed, and you have the feeling that your spirit is being literally starved to death and you need a place where you can hear the words of eternal life - not only pronounced, but interpreted and acted out through the sacraments, and where you can see the things that lift the burdened, downcast soul. You need a place to come to when you are frightened, or bewildered, or discouraged, or lost.

I remember coming into the church one afternoon several years - an afternoon when we had arranged for the church to be open for prayer and meditation (and parenthetically I might add that there are always people here whenever we can arrange to have the church open during the week, people who stop by to say their prayers) - I remember coming in here that afternoon and seeing a young man sitting near the back. I have no idea who he was; he was alone. No one else was here at that moment. His head was buried in his hands and he was sobbing. I do not know what kind of trouble he was in - the source of his disturbance, but quite obviously he had fled to the church where he could sob his heart out without being ashamed and where I hope he found whatever he needed to relieve the anxiety of his heart. My point is this: there are moments in life when all of us need a place like this - a place to which we can turn. "In the time of trouble" said the Psalmist, "He shall hide me in his tabernacle; in the secret of his dwelling place shall he hide me and set me up upon a rock".

MORE TO IT THAN THIS - There's more to it than this, to be sure. You come to this church not only because you belong to it, or because some aspect of its life draws you here, but you come to this particular church because it is part of THE church. In other words, this church represents the Christian movement in the world; it is a place where the Christian movement is localized. And the Christian movement - what exactly is it, and how can it best be described. This is perhaps one of the briefer ways to describe it: THE CHRISTIAN MOVEMENT IS THE MOVEMENT OF GOD TOWARD MEN IN ORDER TO DRAW MEN BACK TO HIMSELF. And let me say this: whenever you think of the movement of Christianity, think of it in its greatest terms. It has many manifestations, to be sure: fund raising, good causes, organizations and responsibilities galore, conventions and meetings without number - all of these things we do in order to implement God's action into the affairs of the world. But the Christian movement primarily is God's movement toward men in order to draw men back unto himself.

This move toward man God made in a man - in the life of Jesus. Little, well meaning men thought that they had put an end to that ministry when they put him to death. But instead of stopping that ministry they set it on fire. They set it moving with an irresistible force that has carried it around the globe and to all corner of the earth. The thing we celebrate on Pentecost and which I wish all of you could fully appreciate is that what originally was nothing but a local matter on the outer fringe of the Roman Empire has down through 20 centuries become a world-wide movement. So that whenever you see a cross - there is the ministry of Christ - the ministry of God toward man - to forgive him when he sins; to heal him when he is sick, to emancipate him when he is enslaved, to rebuke him when he is childish, and to fortify him when he is weak.

And so you come to this particular church because it is your Church. You count on it; it in turn counts on you and depends on your support. You come because you have been drawn here by some aspect of its life. And you also come because it is part of THE church - a place where the Christian movement is localized, where it is brought to a single voice - where you can join its ranks, add your voice to its strengthening witness, your influence to its impact, and at the same time find the spiritual nourishment for your own life!

TWO GREAT INSIGHTS

There are two great insights about the Church that always belong together that I would like to put before you and have you think through in reference to your life and your own church. The first one is the Catholic insight that there is no Christianity without the Church. A lot of people do not agree with this, but speaking personally here, even though I am not as institutionally minded as some ministers, I find that as I grow older I come to agree more and more with this basic insight. In other words, what it is attempting to say is that you cannot be a Christian in private, that you cannot be an effective Christian apart from the Christian community. Perhaps we should put it into a more positive form. You are a more effective Christian when you identify yourself with and belong to a branch of the Christian community. For one thing, you would not be a Christian if the community through 20 centuries had not carefully guarded the tradition and the life handed down to it through the countless generations to you. One inquiring young man was very much disturbed by this idea and he asked an older man to explain it to him. He was asking "Can't you be a good Christian without going to Church? Can't you be a Christian without being a church-man?" They were sitting before an open fire discussing this and the older man went over to the fire and with the tongs in his hand, he proceeded to take one live, burning coal from the fire and put it all by itself on the hearthstone. They watched it for several moments, and watched it go out. This, said the older man, is what happens when you take one person out of the Christian community - the fire in him will gradually die out. How true. I'm sure you've seen it happen, just as I've seen it happen. *YOU CANNOT BE AN EFFECTIVE CHRISTIAN -*

The other insight is what I would term a Protestant insight, and that is that there can be a church without Christianity. This is more of a danger than it is an insight. What it suggested is that the church itself, which is the cradle of Christ, can lose Christ. The Church itself can become so preoccupied with its own affairs, its ecclesiastical machinery, its ritualistic maneuvers, its own organization that Christ is completely lost. This is a danger that many Protestant churches face in our own country - churches that are more like country clubs with a religious atmosphere - churches in which the secular and the sacred are so intermingled that the sharp and cutting edge of the mission of the church has been dulled. We must not say this in criticism of other churches; we must say it looking at ourselves, at our own church, being on the alert to see that it does not happen here. Never let us forget that the church exists to change lives; attitudes - to lift people to the way of life that Christ proclaimed.

A DANGER

This leads me on to say one last thing, to point out to you a real danger that you must constantly guard against when you go to church seriously and regularly as most of you do. There is a danger that you may come to love your church so much and care for it so much that ~~you do not want to let others use it, to share its resources of plant and personnel with others outside the immediate church family, and this too that you love and care for it so much that you yourself begin~~ to lose interest in the world. I am sure this is not the case with any of you, but there are people in many churches today across our land who become so preoccupied with the church that they, in a sense, withdraw more and more into the church forgetting the world outside on the assumption that the world will have to take care of itself - that they are safe within the walls of the city of God. Perhaps they are but I have the strong suspicion that if they are looking for Christ, they will find him out in the alley ways of the city of mankind - involved - involved in the lives of people and deeply concerned over the shackles that ma be making their lives miserable. Jesus was involved in the social issues of his day - this is why he was put to death. Don't ever forget this. And don't forget that God loved the world, not the church - "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son" Christ died to save the world - not the church. The church has a way of shutting itself up in a small, safe enclosure in which the sheep may safely graze - apart from the rest of the world.

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Let me put it to you this way - the more you read your Bible, the more carefully you must read the daily paper. For unless the vision and the life that comes to you through the Bible is then channeled through the church to the needs of mankind - in your thinking, in your actions, in your decision, then there is not much use in your reading it. For it is the task and the vision of the Christian Church to carry the spirit of Jesus Christ into the world that sorely needs it until world begins to feel something of the warmth of that life that men felt along when he passed by.

LET US PRAY: We are thankful, O God, for the church which down through the centuries of our history has continued the ministry of Jesus. We recognize its imperfections and its shortcomings, but we are also aware of what the church can do when its people have been touched and possessed by Thy spirit. May we in these moments dedicate ourselves so completely to the ministry of this church that we may go from here into the life of our community - not to condemn it, but to save it and to reclaim it for a life that is true, beautiful and good.

PASTORAL PRAYER: February 14th

OUR HEAVENLY FATHER, as we come together in this hour set aside for prayer and meditation, fill our hearts and minds with a greater consciousness of Thee.

It is not altogether habit and custom that have brought us here this morning, but rather our own deep sense of need and our desire to learn more of thy will for us individually and collectively.

Thou knowest all too well the many things that are on our minds....the things we worry about, the things we aspire to become...the things we wish to accomplish.

As we worship thee, help us to renew our hold on those secret sources of strength. Help us to pull together the scattered forces of our souls. Help us to have a vision of what life can be when it is patterned after thy divine will.

Grant to this church and to all who worship within its walls all those things that are necessary for the enrichment and the upbuilding of life.

Strengthen and confirm the faithful.
Visit and relieve the sick.
Restore the penitent.
Reclaim the lost.
Arouse the careless and the indifferent.
Comfort the lonely and the distressed.

WE PRAY that the influence of this day may be strong in our land. We would pray for a broader vision of the needs of all men. Guide and direct those who are working patiently to tear down the barriers that separate men. And hasten that day, O God, when all men shall kneel before thee and live together as brothers.....knowing one God, one truth, and one way.

Hear now the prayers that are to be softly and silently whispered in the quietness of this place. Be sensitive, O God, to the appeals of our hearts. We ask this in the spirit of Christ.

Amen

ANNOUNCEMENTS:

I would remind you that refreshments will be served in Fellowship Hall following this service, and that members and visiting friends are encouraged to share in these moments of fellowship that we have every Sunday following the service.

For those of you who are visitors, we would not only like to invite you to come to Fellowship Hall following the service, but this too - we would encourage you to take a moment to sign one of our Guest Books before you depart.

We have friends from far and wide because they have taken time to do this, and we hope you will do the same.

The announcements concerning the various things that will be taking place in the church are listed for you in the bulletin, and you will notice that we are arranging another of our "Conversations in Church Membership" for next Sunday evening for those of you who in recent weeks have found a church home with us and who would now like to consider the steps that lead to membership in this church.

We come now to that time in our service when all of us have an opportunity to participate....

THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH

Let us have a church that dares
Imitate the heroism of Jesus;
Seek inspiration as he sought it;
Judge the past as he;
Act on the present like him;
Pray as he prayed;
Work as he wrought;
Live as he lived.

Let us have a church for the whole man;
Truth for the mind,
Good works for the hands,
Love for the heart;
And for the soul, that aspiration after perfection,
That unfaltering faith in God,
Which, like lightning in the clouds,
Shines brightest when elsewhere it is most dark.
—Theodore Parker.

THANKFUL FOR OTHERS

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