

Birthday Affirmations

Pentecost Comments on the Tercentennial of First Church

Text: Acts 2: selections

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Today is Pentecost, the day on the liturgical calendar when we celebrate the birth of the church. It's a spirited day, a day of passion that deserves the loft of balloons and candles on a cake!

Even more: today is also a day of tercentennial celebration of this church, First Church, 300 years on the corner of Farmington and Main *in* the heart of West Hartford. Actually, it's more accurate to say *as* the heart of West Hartford, because our church was the epicenter of the founding of this community, and ours is the corner around which was born all of what has emerged as West Hartford!

In this light, I simply want to make two affirmations, birthday affirmations, if you will, about this church, wonderful and exasperating as it can be, and the whole church of our Lord Jesus.

A first affirmation arises from the very deepest place in my soul. Simply this: I believe in and love the community we call the church! I mean that not just in the abstract sense, as in the church universal, though certainly that, too! but more particularly, I mean the local church, right here. I believe in and love this church, from the rock ledge beneath us to the Chi Rho on top of our steeple.

This anniversary year has given me time to get in touch with just how important the church has always been in my life. Perhaps that goes without saying, as I'm the son and the grandson of pastors! But, honestly, as far back as I can remember, the place of the church and the energy center of spirit, in the Greek, the *ekklesia*, has been a precious part of my life.

First Church in Berkley, California, where I was baptized; the Bowne Street Dutch Reformed Church in New York City, where my grandfather served; three congregations in Connecticut, around which I grew up; the unique church for youth we call Silver Lake; the Chapel at Susquehanna University; Trinitarian Congregational Church in Concord, where I was pastor to youth; and congregations I have been privileged to serve as pastor: Newfane, Granby and West Hartford.

ee cummings once wrote a poem that I have come to hold as my own.

i am a little church (no great cathedral)
far from the splendor and squalor of hurrying cities
i do not worry if briefer days grow briefest
i am not sorry when the sun and rain make april

my life is the life of the reaper and the sower
my prayers are the prayers of earth's own clumsily striving
finding and losing and laughing and crying children
whose any sadness or joy is my grief or my gladness

around me surges a miracle of unceasing
birth and glory and death and resurrection
over my sleeping self float flaming symbols of hope
and i wake to a perfect patience of mountains

winter by spring i lift my diminutive spire to
merciful him whose only now is forever
standing erect in the deathless truth of his presence
welcoming humbly his light and proudly his darkness

And then add this: I believe in and am in love with and am devoted to and am passionate about Jesus!

That might make some of our more privatized New England Congregational sensibilities wiggle a little bit! It might cause some to whisper "don't get too evangelical on us now!" But honestly, what would I do, what would you do, without the life-giving, fumble-forgiving, vision-emerging, grace-holding, earth-walking-presence and love of Jesus?

Scripture tells us that he is everywhere, and *all* the time. Remember "Lo I am with you always"? But, most especially, "Wherever two or more are gathered in my name." I believe that to the marrow! I believe that spirit was fully a part of our first day, 300 years ago; and in the 109,500 days ever since! And I believe he was present on the first day of all first days when the church, the *ekklesia*, came into being 2,000 years ago.

We are nearly done with Confirmation Class for this year, and the youth have just finished their own personal faith statements. Just listen to a few of their affirmation about Jesus: "he was the greatest teacher and storyteller" he puts hope in the hearts of others" his light abundantly shines everywhere" he is the human version of God" he put his faith in people and people put their faith in him" and, he shows us the way to God."

I told them the famous story of Karl Barth, one of the very large theological minds of our progressive protestant tradition. As he finished one of his last lectures at Harvard, one of his students asked: "Dr. Barth, you are among the greatest of theological thinkers of all time. Can you boil it down for us in one sentence?" Barth stepped aside from his lectern and said, in his deep German accent: "Yes, for me it all comes down to this. Jesus loves me, this I know . . . for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus loves me. The bible tells me so."

I believe in the church and I am passionate about Jesus, who in living spirit has been, is now and ever will be "from the first moment of it all. I hope you can affirm these with me as we say together: Happy Anniversary! Happy Birthday! Happy Pentecost! Let's have a party! And may the winds of holy spirit carry us to full rejoicing!

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