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The celebration of the Day of Pentecost has always reminded me of a birthday party. It's a festive occasion, to be sure; it's a celebration, and a time for the Church to observe a very important anniversary in its life. And thus the Day of Pentecost has all the looks, and all the *feel*, of a really good birthday party.

A week ago Saturday, a child in my eldest son's class invited all her classmates to celebrate her birthday at the bowling alley in Old Saybrook. I volunteered to pick Cameron up when it was over, and I arrived at the bowling alley about fifteen minutes early. (Why I imagined that *any* eleven-year-old would want to go home fifteen minutes early from a party is beyond me, but there you have it...) And when I got there, I discovered there was not one but two birthday parties in full swing. I knew this because I introduced myself as Cameron's father to the mother of the wrong birthday girl.

I share this with you to give you a sense of the scene. The bowling alley was awash in all the trappings of a birthday party: balloons; cake; gifts; noise; music; laughter; decorations...did I mention the noise? And when Cameron and I finally left I asked him the obligatory parental questions of how the party was, did he have fun, what did he like ~ and, as was to be expected, he described the *trappings* of the birthday party. He liked the bowling, the goodie bag, the trivia contests run by the bowling alley's DJ, the pizza, the cake, etc., etc., etc. But that's all he described: the *trappings*. He described the birthday by what he saw and by what he experienced.

In a very similar manner, that is exactly how many Christians describe the event of Pentecost: that is, they describe Pentecost by its *trappings*. Pentecost is described as the day we hang the wonderful dove mobile (the dove being a symbol of the Holy Spirit); it's the day we wear red; and it's the day that we read the lesson about tongues of fire resting upon the heads of

the apostles and that they began speaking in different foreign languages! As a result, sometimes we hear the lesson from Acts *read* in different languages; sometimes we hang red balloons to symbolize the fire; sometimes we even have a birthday cake! Does all this sound familiar? Because *this* is how Pentecost is usually described: by its trappings. Pentecost is described by people based upon what they see and based upon what they experience.

And yet, just as a child's birthday cannot be completely defined by *its* trappings, neither can Pentecost be completely described by *its* trappings. A birthday is a celebration of a person's *life*. It marks that a person is another year older, to be sure...and it (hopefully) marks that a person is growing in wisdom, in stature, and doing things that perhaps they wouldn't have done the year before, or even the decade before.

Likewise ~ the *real* meaning of Pentecost cannot be found in balloons or in cake; and it cannot be discovered by wearing red. These are symbols that provide *much* to the celebration and point us towards the *real* reason for the celebration~ but they are not the *reason* for the celebration in and of themselves. Pentecost is a birthday celebration ~ to be specific, Pentecost is the birthday of the Church in mission ~ and as such, Pentecost is the celebration of the Church living out her missionary life.

Ironically, and in some places *tragically*, some people define Pentecost as being “the birthday of the Church”. The important words “in mission” are dropped out. Yet absolutely nothing could be further from the truth! The Church, it can be argued, began when Jesus first started inviting his disciples to follow him. On the Day of Pentecost, however, the Holy Spirit came upon the apostles (the early Church) and sent them out to as people *in mission*. To be sure, they were given the gift of speaking in different foreign languages ~ and why? Because the Jewish people who were in Jerusalem at that time, celebrating the Passover, had come from all over the world. So the apostles were given the gift of being able to tell each of them, in their

own language, the good news of Jesus! Yet unfortunately, the emphasis of Pentecost is often placed on the gift of being able to speak in foreign languages ~ and not on the purpose of that gift. That is, the focus is not placed on *why* the apostles were given the gift of speaking in a foreign language.

Because what happened next? What happened next, after the Jewish people from all over the world heard the Good News, was that they stayed in Jerusalem for much, much longer than they expected or had resources for. And after further receiving further instructions about Jesus, they then went *back* to their respective countries conveying the same Good News that they had heard. It is further believed that many of these people are the ones who paved the way for the later trips of the apostle Paul. So what we learn through Scripture is that the focus of the Pentecost event is on the *mission* of the Church! Not on the ability to suddenly speak in a foreign language ~ the focus of Pentecost and the purpose of Pentecost is mission. The beginning of the Church in mission.

Now let me be clear: when I asked my son what he liked best about his friend's birthday party at the bowling alley, I did not really expect him to answer by saying, "You know, Father, I thoroughly enjoyed being able to celebrate the life of my school chum. Time, as you know, is such a precious commodity; a valuable treasure; and therefore I enjoyed celebrating with her the fact that she is growing in wisdom and in stature."

He didn't say that ~ and I would have thought it rather strange if he had. But even though he didn't say that, it doesn't mean that he is not capable of learning that birthdays are celebrations of *life* ~ and that they mean so much more than just a day to get presents or receive goodie bags. He described the birthday by what he saw and by what he experienced ~ but that does not mean that he is incapable of learning new insights and having new experiences.

Likewise, when it comes to the celebration of Pentecost, we too are capable of learning new insights and having new experiences. Remember, Pentecost is the birthday of the Church in mission. As Christian people, we believe that the Holy Spirit has given us gifts. The Holy Spirit has given each child whom we are about to baptize gifts as well, they just haven't unwrapped them yet! And thus if *we* want to celebrate Pentecost ~ if we truly want to celebrate Pentecost in the "spirit" of its purpose ~ then we, too, can engage in the work and in the joy of mission.

We can invite a friend to come to church with us. We can come to a gathering of those who are discussing and learning about our world mission activities on June 5th, or come to any of their meetings, and explore the possibilities of mission in that venue. Or we can come to a gathering of those who are involved in community mission and learn how we are seeking to transform lives in that venue. We can read the Beatitudes in the Gospel of Matthew and find one that speaks to us, and then become a part of an organization or ministry group that seeks to make one of the Beatitudes a reality.

In short, I invite you on this Pentecost Day to give yourself permission to have a new Pentecost experience. I invite you to look beyond the trappings, to find the purpose, and then bring that purpose to life! For I guarantee you, once you do? ~ when you are asked what Pentecost all about, you'll be able to say with confidence, "Pentecost is the birth of the Church in mission." ~ and be able to show that person how it's done. Amen.