



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Powered by the Spirit

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, May 24, 2015  
The Day of Pentecost: Whitsunday—Based on Acts 2: 1-11; John 15:26-27, 16:4b-15*

*When the day of Pentecost had come, the disciples were all together in one place. Suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind ... Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.*

Happy Pentecost, my friends! This is one of the great festivals of our church. In our culture, Pentecost [*Pente* (50), 50 days after Easter] is not as well known as Christmas or Easter, which may be to say that it's not as commercial. In other parts of the world, I've learned, Pentecost is a national holiday. I almost missed a train in France because I didn't realize they were running on a Pentecost holiday schedule.

Pentecost is sometimes called the birthday of the Church. Whatever happened on that day of Pentecost 2,000 years ago, it transformed Jesus' disciples from a little band of frightened people, huddled behind locked doors, into a purposeful movement—a new community—strengthened, led, emboldened by God's Spirit.

Two thousand years after this amazing event, we are still throwing a party! Many of us wear red, traditionally the color of the Holy Spirit. In this grand space, where we have enough room, we wave these amazing 20-foot-long red banners, recalling those tongues, as of fire. We'd like to keep tongues of fire as an image only, not literal—we try hard to keep the banners out of the candles.

At three of our services today, we hear this Acts reading in many languages at the same time. The first time I heard it, I was alarmed, almost to the point of speed-walking to the nearest exit. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand up ... and it still does!

Pentecost is also an especially appropriate time for baptisms; you can understand why. At 11am today, we baptize 5 people: 3 infants and 2 adults: Caelum, Pam, Chapin, Ali, Owen. Any time even one person is baptized here, we all renew our own baptism vows—the best renewal movement any church can have.

What we're doing here is not celebrating the past or trying to re-create the past. Though we wouldn't mind if that happened ... The next verses in Acts tell us that when Peter, made bold by the Spirit, preached immediately after this experience, three thousand were baptized. We would be delighted if that happened here! St. Bart's is uniquely equipped to handle 3,000 baptisms, given our Olympic-size swimming pool downstairs.

Neither is our observing Pentecost an exercise in nostalgia about the Church's glory days. We are acknowledging and celebrating that God's still at work in the world about us. We are acknowledging and celebrating—and reminding ourselves—that we, too, are powered by the Spirit.

It was interesting to me to note that, right around this time of Pentecost, the birthday of the Church, there have been several recent reports giving yet more statistics about the “decline” of the mainline churches in the United States.

According to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center, called “America's Changing Religious Landscape,” published May 12: “The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion [the “nones”] is growing. Moreover, these changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages.” Yet America

remains an overwhelmingly Christian nation. (<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>)

Another report, published March 2015 by The Episcopal Church is specifically about congregations of the Episcopal Church. It's called "New Facts on Episcopal Church Growth and Decline." This report looks at factors that are correlated with growing churches, as well as characteristics of declining churches. Though I've only had a chance to skim the report (30 pages), I noted several points to share with you. ([http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/new\\_facts\\_on\\_growth\\_2014\\_final.pdf](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/documents/new_facts_on_growth_2014_final.pdf))

The churches that are growing strongly agreed with this statement: "Our congregation is spiritually vital and alive." Growing churches have a sense of spiritual life that goes deeper than human relationships and organizational/ritual activities.

Growing churches also strongly agreed with this statement: "Our congregation is willing to change to meet new challenges." Any congregation is a living community. As with any living thing, it is constantly changing, as is the environment surrounding it. Vital congregations are those that intentionally adapt, rather than drift into change.

This made me think of St. Bart's. Our parish was founded in 1835. Since then, this parish has had three different locations, each in a very different part of this city. At each location, the congregation adapted to changes in its immediate neighborhood, as well as to changes in our country and in the world over that time span.

Now our congregation faces another transition, this one internal, as we prepare to send Buddy off with our love, our thanks, our very best wishes. We are preparing, very intentionally, to search for a new rector.

You may find surprising, as I did, these additional points from the Episcopal Church report:

- Drums and other percussion instruments (NOT electric guitars): highly correlated with GROWING congregations. Heads up, musicians.
- Churches who described their worship services as "reverent": DECLINING congregations. Inverse relationship.
- Churches that change the style/format of worship, or add a different type of service: GROWING. Those of you who have opinions about our platform, take note.

And my personal favorite:

- The highest percentage of GROWING churches describe their coffee hour as "chaotic." We are on the leading edge here.

These reports are based on solid research. They offer interesting, even useful, statistics and insights. Admittedly, I find such things a bit too interesting.

Personally, I agree with Phyllis Tickle's assessment from her book, *The Great Emergence*, which a group of us studied a few years ago. Tickle quotes an Episcopal bishop: "Every 500 years the Church has a giant rummage sale," otherwise known as a Reformation.

I believe we are living through the latest Reformation of the Church. Some of the old ways and structures are falling away. New ones are trying to grow. It is confusing, sometimes alarming. We can't see exactly where we're headed.

One of most heartening things I learned in that book study: Whenever there is a Reformation, new ways of being Church are created, **and** at the same time the old way of being Church is reformed, re-formed—it emerges stronger than ever.

At Pentecost, on the "birthday of the Church," it's especially appropriate to take a good look at Church. To consider again why it is we follow Jesus, who left us the Advocate, God's Spirit of Truth. Following Jesus is our particular way of following the Spirit, being powered by the Spirit. Not the only way, but our way.

Pentecost is also a time to celebrate the action of the Holy Spirit, the most overlooked person of the Trinity.

Pentecost is a good time to renew our resolve to being open to the Spirit's leading—the Spirit of Truth—not my little truth, but God's larger Truth.

A violent wind filled that house. Breath or wind is a symbol of the Spirit of God. Remember Genesis, God breathing life into the dust of the earth. Remember the prophet Ezekiel's vision of a valley of dry bones. When God breathes into the dry bones, they come to life and stand on their feet. The Pentecost wind represents the power of God to bring life to the dry bones of our faith.

The Holy Spirit, our Advocate, God's Spirit of Truth, is God alive and well and working in the world. Always, always working to bring life out of death, to bring justice, to break down the barriers that divide us, to bring healing, to bring love into this world God is still creating.

Look around. Where do you perceive God's Spirit at work in the world? In St. Bart's? In your own life, or the lives of those close to you?

Yesterday, when I heard the news from Ireland, I smiled: the Spirit at work, breaking down the barriers.

When I hear the news from Syria, from Iraq, Iran, Nigeria, even from Israel and Palestine, from Cleveland or Baltimore, it's hard to smile. But even in these places of violence and brutality and injustice, make no mistake—God's Spirit is at work.

Some of you may know Tom Ehrich, an Episcopal priest, religion writer, our former staff colleague at St. Bart's. Tom put it this way in a recent column of his:

*[Some churches may be in trouble, but] The future for God is as bright and glorious as ever. Our ever-changing, ever-dynamic, ever-loving and ever-transformational God will be just fine ... [Churches who meet the challenges of this world] will look outward, proclaim good news, welcome strangers, serve "the least of these," give their lives and resources away, work for justice and mercy, be faith communities seven days a week, and put love ahead of right opinion and kindness ahead of victory. And God will be in the midst of them.*

(<http://www.religionnews.com/2015/05/19/5-ways-churches-inflicted-pain-commentary/>)

Pentecost may be the official end to the church's Easter season. But we know Easter never ends. We are, in fact, an Easter people, born of water and the Spirit. We are Pentecostal, in the very deepest sense of that word.

"The Holy Spirit throughout all ages has resisted the most strenuous efforts to capture and contain its divine whirlwind. It still has a way of blowing our orderly notions all around almost as soon as we think we have them alphabetized and carefully under the paperweights." [from a Community of the Holy Spirit card]

God is a "wild God," Barbara Ehrenreich says. God does not play according to our rules—a good thing.

God is bigger, even, than the Church.

The Spirit blows where it will.

We should hang on for dear life and let it carry us.

*Amen.*

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