



First United Church of Oak Park

A Good Day For a Birthday

Acts 2: 1-21

The Rev. Ally Vertigan

May 23, 2021

I have ... a quirk about me. Something that strikes me as odd. It's rather arbitrary, and also pretty common? My dad does this. My best friend does this. Maybe even you do this. (If you do, put a comment in the chat box so we can be in solidarity together!) When I want to start a new thing, I *really* want to start on a Monday. Or the first of the month. (It's even better when that first of the month *is* a Monday. Could it be any more perfect?)

If I want to commit to more consistent meal prep, for example, I'll shop all weekend. I'll cook all day Sunday, assembling my little Tupperware containers with lunches for the week, and then order some pizza for supper because I couldn't possibly waste a perfectly prepped meal on a Sunday. When I want to commit to a prayer practice, I'll look at the calendar and see that it's the 27th and think, "Okay, the first is in a few days, and then I'll be ready." I love it when things ... line up. When it's even, and clean-cut. I imagine a future moment when I say, "Ahh, yes, I began my well-rounded meditation habit on June 1, 2021!"

Fresh starts are my *favorite*. I want them to feel saturated with meaning. I want them to happen at the "right" time. I want them to work. I want the *best* chance at success. Starting things on a Monday. Or the first of the month. Or ... some significant date ... it's wildly appealing to me. I let myself believe that surely, if I just wait until then, the right moment, I will be more successful.

The scene we encounter in today's Scripture reading couldn't be more *opposite* than the clean, tidy, fresh start I just described. Many Jews were gathered together: to celebrate the harvest. This festival was a pilgrimage; folks from all over came to Jerusalem, mingling with those who already lived there. Scholars, families, rabbis, converts to Judaism ... everyone was there. I imagine there was great action, chaos even! The city must have been overflowing with energy, hardly able to contain itself ... unable to maintain routine and normal order.

Locals and guests, folks with different customs and ways of understanding, all together in the same place, at the same time.

There had to have been misunderstandings at the market, or folks just standing still ... pointing ... asking for directions, maddening to those who traverse those roads every day. All this energy with an influx of different languages to boot! The scene we encounter in today's Scripture reading couldn't be more *opposite* than a clean, tidy, straightforward, fresh start.

And what does our clever God do? Instead of eliminating this chaos, God leans in. God matches the energy of the city, pouring out the Holy Spirit like tongues of fire on each of the disciples. The people to whom they spoke were baffled, shocked as though someone so different from them could speak *their* language at a time when they least expected it. Observers watched these disciples talking to people in the city and said, "Wow, they have GOT to be drunk. There is no other explanation." All reason had escaped. All order had been disregarded. Anything that was perhaps expected to happen was turned on its head. Instead of removing the chaos altogether, God leaned in. God made it so people could understand the chaos ... they could make it through, together, as one. That day, God doesn't appear to me to be interested in things going smoothly. God doesn't seem to wait for everything to line up juuuuuust right. God dives in.

God dives in, unfurling the Holy Spirit for the sake of prophecy. So that young ones would have visions. So that elders would dream again. The enslaved, the ones society would use and leave behind? They would tell of things to come. God commits to showing signs that *something* would happen, something momentous ... something as awe-striking as fire and smoke, as mind-boggling as the bright sun turning dark, and the moon turning crimson. The Holy Spirit is a sign of these things. The Holy Spirit's work is to strike awe in us, boggle our minds. The gift of a way forward comes out of chaos, confusion — when we least expect it. This is the birthday of the church.

I am so grateful that God doesn't wait for a Monday to start something new. God doesn't wait for the first of the month to breathe new life into the world. God doesn't need everything to be clear-cut and even-keel before giving the gift of understanding.

While we celebrate Pentecost as the birthday of the church, we must remember

how chaotic it was, how confusing it must have been, how otherwise commonplace and ordinary that day could have been — that day that God decided to pour out the Holy Spirit and do a new thing. To call something new into being. To start something fresh again. That day was a good day for a birthday. Any day is a good day for a birthday.

As a hospital chaplain, I get the great privilege of witnessing people's stories. Last week, I was talking to a patient who has leukemia. He and his partner were telling me about the ups and downs of treatment, the commutes back and forth from home for complex medical procedures. It slipped out easily in our conversation. He said, "Honey, how long was it since my birthday?" He was trying to remember the day his brother donated bone marrow for his stem cell transplant. This patient has two birthdays: the day he was born, and a day that emerged out of the chaos of cancer. The day a leukemia patient receives their stem-cell transplant is often referred to as their birthday.

A day someone stops drinking alcohol or using drugs is also known as a birthday. A sober birthday. I asked a colleague at the hospital recently what they were doing after their third day in a row of 12-hour shifts. "I'm taking my partner out for dinner. It's her birthday. It's been six years today since she had a drink. Last year for her fifth, we threw a party!" This story is echoed by patient after patient who lives through substance use disorder as well. Nearly everyone in recovery I've met has been able to tell me their birthday — a day that emerged out of chaos. A day something new began.

This is the good news of Pentecost, of the beginnings of our Christian church. Any day is a good day for a birthday. The day you get a stem-cell transplant. The day you make a commitment to sobriety, one day at a time. The day you rescue a pet from the shelter. The day you adopt. The day you leave a harmful relationship. This is the good news of Pentecost: Any day is a good day for a birthday. The day a trans person uses their name in public for the first time. The day you graduate. The day you move into a new home. The day you find meaningful work. This is the good news of Pentecost: Any day is a good day for a birthday. Each day the church sheds its skin and goes boldly forward where God is calling. Each day the church takes to the streets to advocate for equity and justice. Each day the church continues to embrace the gifts of technology. Each day the church welcomes the poor. Feeds the hungry. Clothes the naked.

This is the good news of Pentecost: Any day is a good day for a birthday. It doesn't have to be a Monday. Or the first of the month. It will probably be chaotic. Scary. Confusing. Everything may be turned on its head. God doesn't need to wait for everything to line up juuuuust right. Today, we celebrate Pentecost, the birthday of the church. May we proclaim Pentecost every day of the year: Every day is a good day for a birthday.