

This is God's Church  
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15:10

“This is God’s Church” Pilgrim Church UCC, May 24, 2015—Pentecost Sunday (Acts 2:1-21)

“And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 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.”[1]

Well, the Holy Spirit certainly arrives in style on Pentecost—with wind, and tongues of fire, and gifts of speaking in diverse languages. Pentecost marks the birth of the Christian Church for us. It’s full of energy, passion, mystery, and the Holy Spirit. Just look at the gifts of the Holy Spirit! Look at Peter facing the crowd and declaring the Good News of the Gospel for all to hear! Look at this new revelation of God’s presence among us that ushers in the Church!

Whether we believe it happened exactly like this or not, it’s a story full of meaning. Fire accompanies the divine presence. To this day, we light candles in our churches to symbolize the start of our worship in praise of God. Wind is how we can feel the Spirit sweeping over the earth—seeing the wind blow through the trees in the midst of worship is such a beautiful sight. And of course speaking in diverse languages shows that we are called to witness to God’s love to the ends of the earth and teach the Christian faith in a way that everyone can connect with and understand. We’re called to meet people where they are. It’s a bold story of this small band of Jesus’ followers having a message so important to share that they would put their lives on the line to do it. They would face persecution and violence and hardship to spread Jesus’ message of radical love. Pentecost is such a great story.

We need to tap into the courage of the disciples on Pentecost now more than ever. On May 12, the Pew Research Center released their latest study—“America’s Changing Religious Landscape” and sent shockwaves across Christian circles. From denominational leaders to Catholic and Protestant bloggers to Clergy to lay folks helping lead churches, many people have begun to analyze the latest findings on religion in America. What we learned that has people so concerned is that between 2007 and 2014 the Christian share of the population fell from around 78% to 70%, driven mostly by declines among Mainline Protestants like us and Roman Catholics. The Unaffiliated (with any religion) experienced the most growth and Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.

The drop of Christian affiliation is pronounced among young adults, but it’s occurring among Americans of all ages. The Pew report states that “the same trends are also seen among whites, blacks, and Latinos; among both college graduates and adults with only a high school education; and among women as well as men.”[2] And here’s what can give us some pause in our corner of the Christian world—the median age of Mainline Protestant adults is now 52 and Mainline Protestants experienced the greatest drop in absolute numbers according to these Pew polls. There are five million fewer Mainline Protestant adults since 2007. Okay, are we starting to feel like an endangered species yet, or is it just me?

So you look at all these statistics, and of course people are freaking out in Mainline Protestantism. We’re in this new era of the Church and it’s scary because it’s unknown. The Church isn’t going to be the same in fifty years—though it probably shouldn’t be! We get to be part of this whole new era. Here’s the thing, it seems that the people who really want to worship, to connect to God and a community, to grow their faith, to care and be Christ’s

disciples out in the world, we're all still here. We're becoming lean and mean in Mainline Protestantism partly because it's just no longer that cool to be in church on Sunday, no offense. We have to prioritize church given everything else that's happening in our lives. This is so different than how it used to be in the 1950s when churches were booming and people went to church because that's just what you did and shops and restaurants and sports complexes were closed on Sunday mornings, so I hear!

Is it such a bad thing that the folks who come to worship on Sunday mornings (like all of us) come because we really want to be here? Not because it makes you look good or because it's what you're "supposed to do" or because there's nothing else open on Sunday morning—we're here because we find value in worshipping God in a Christian community. When asked to reflect on the Pew poll on Religion in America, Professor Harvey Cox at Harvard Divinity School said, "I do not bemoan a minority status for Christianity in America. Christianity has often been at its best and most vigorous when a minority (100-350 CE), and has not always performed well as a majority. Jesus said his followers were to be the 'salt of the earth,' and a lamp in darkness."<sup>[3]</sup>

Jesus' disciples were small in number and had no idea what would come after that momentous Pentecost. Peter preaches like he has never preached before to that crowd in Jerusalem. He speaks about young men seeing visions and old men dreaming dreams, that people shall prophecy and everyone who calls on God's name will be saved. People think they're so crazy that they accuse the disciples of being drunk. Peter responds that it's only 9 AM, we're not drunk! We're just on fire with the love of God and we want to tell you what Jesus taught us—to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves. We can usher in God's realm through our just actions. God's grace extends to all of us even when we don't live up to God's intentions for our lives. And Peter speaks these words in a way that people new to Jesus' message can really, truly hear.

One of the challenges of the Pew Research report is that we are going to have to change some of the ways we've always done things in the Church. We're going to have to craft our message and our programs and our offerings in a way that people can truly hear in 2015—much like the disciples had to speak to people in their own languages on Pentecost! Professor Harvey Cox also said, "Regarding 'religiously unaffiliated,' notice that surveys show that very few of these people want to be thought of as atheists. They sometimes call themselves 'spiritual but not religious.' This means they are objecting to the institutional and theological scaffolding of the faith, usually not to the core content of the message. They are often in 'search mode.' In some ways this is a healthy development, but it means religious leaders need to shape new ways of making them feel welcome."<sup>[4]</sup>

We have to change how we speak about our Christian faith to people who may never have heard Jesus' teachings. Not just religious leaders either, all of us have to make people feel welcome and change how we communicate. With more and more people being Unaffiliated with any religion, the base of their knowledge is different than it's been before. We just may have to check our assumptions at the sanctuary door.

Recently, a friend of mine was commenting that sometimes he worries that the congregation he serves doesn't really know how to be the Church. There are many people who are new to Christianity and it's a quirky congregation. Common sense ways that we feel a Church should function—well, it seems beyond them sometimes and can be frustrating for him as the pastor.

One time he was speaking to a lay leader about a problem in the Sunday School. To try to get his point across, he referenced the story of the Good Samaritan.<sup>[5]</sup> You know, about a man who was traveling and got robbed and left for dead on the side of the road. A priest and a Levite walk right by him, ignoring this wounded man in need. And it's a Samaritan (the sworn

enemy of the Jewish people) who stops and helps the man. My friend referenced the Good Samaritan and the lay leader bravely said to him, “I don’t know that story.” He was a little shocked, but then took the time to tell her Jesus’ parable to help explain his point about the issues with Sunday School.

After she left, my friend sat in his office just dumbfounded and feeling rather dejected, wondering what he was doing serving this congregation. They don’t know the Good Samaritan? Why did I take the time and go into student loan debt to get this Master of Divinity degree when it seems like no one knows about our Christian faith even in the Church. No one gets me and my leadership—what am I doing here? But then it dawned on him, and this is what he really wanted to share with me—he got to be the first person to tell her the story of the Good Samaritan. This honest adult woman, this beloved member of the congregation, this person new to the faith, and he got to be the one to share one of the greatest parables Jesus ever taught with her. And she absolutely loved Jesus’ story.

As religion shifts and changes in our country, there will be more encounters like this. And it won’t just be clergy who are telling people the transformational, inspiring, life-altering stories of our Christian faith for the first time—it will be all of us. Let me rephrase that, it has to be all of us if we’re going to sail through these stormy, uncertain waters. We can be like Peter who gets up on Pentecost, goes outside to the crowds, and speaks from his heart about what God is doing in our world and in our lives and how the teachings of Jesus Christ and these sacred stories can change us. We’re living in an uncertain religious landscape in America, it’s true and there’s no burying our heads in the sand and denying it. The good news is always that it’s not my church or even your church—this is God’s Church and God will be with us as we navigate the unknown and exciting future together. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Acts 2:2-4.

[2] “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015.

[3] Harvey Cox, As quoted by Michael Naughton, “Examining America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 15, 2015, <http://hds.harvard.edu/news/2015/05/15/examining-americas-changing-relig...>

[4] Harvey Cox, As quoted by Michael Naughton, “Examining America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 15, 2015, <http://hds.harvard.edu/news/2015/05/15/examining-americas-changing-relig...>

[5] Luke 10:25-37.