

Pentecost

Ecclesial Health

John 15:26-27 – 16:4b-15

North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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June 5, 2022

²⁶ “When the Paraclete comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf. ²⁷ You also are to testify, because you have been with me from the beginning.

“I did not say these things to you from the beginning, because I was with you. ⁵ But now I am going to [the One] who sent me, yet none of you asks me, ‘Where are you going?’ ⁶ But because I have said these things to you, sorrow has filled your hearts. ⁷ Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Paraclete will not come to you, but if I go, I will send him to you....

¹² “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. ¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me because he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine. For this reason I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

Welcome to the 7th and final mark of Vital Congregations, Ecclesial Health. Ecclesia is the Greek word for “church.” We’re talking about church health. Today is, as I’m sure you are aware by now, the Feast of Pentecost. Today we remember the way the Holy Spirit arrived to bring energy, and fire, and LIFE to the church.... Today the church is 1990 years old or so and it is looking... *ooh*.

What can we say this morning about the health of the church today? It’s a hot mess. I’m not sure you’ve been paying attention, but let me give you a run down. Let’s see:

- Well, there’s the garden variety church shrinking problem. The PCUSA has 1,193,770 members in 2021; 4.25 million in 1965...
- It’s not just us: every church is shrinking.
- COVID exacerbated the problem. An estimated 1 in 5 churches risked closure. Millions of people stopped going to church during the pandemic.
- That’s all the cultural shift. Should we talk about churches imploding?
- There’s the SBC; we found out last week that there was a strategic cover up of sexual abuse by not one but hundreds of pastors, with thousands of victims; the denomination knew and decided not to share
- There’s the Methodist Church, they are in a slow-motion collapse, divided about the issue that is at the heart of Jesus’ ministry, same-gender sex
- The Episcopalians had a mellow week, but we did just learn that their leading theologians affirmed that Communion is only for baptized; of course, when Jesus gave his body and blood it was only ever intended for church members

Happy Pentecost! Good God, the church needs a mighty Spirit today. We are a mess. What can we say about church health on this Pentecost?

Let's start close to home, here at NDPC. Let me first say that when people ask me, "how are things at North Decatur," my answer is, "we're a healthy church." Amen? It may not sound like I'm bragging, but that's saying something these days.

NDPC is healthy by most ways you can measure. Our finances are great—you have been generous throughout the pandemic—not just to the church, but to mission partners. We have terrific elders—we always have. We have a great staff! Worship attendance is down about 1/3 from where we usually are, but that doesn't include the 60-80 folks who watch services online most weeks. Our social media is finally working on all major platforms. Youth groups are meeting again—off to Kent's farm today. Montreat is next week. Mission has been hard, but you all have kept finding ways to support our partners, locally and globally. We're doing something really cool—something we haven't done in years... it's called "planning." I think it's really going to make a difference next church year for how connected you feel.

According to the things you can count in church—money in the plate, butts in pews—NDPC is fine. But church is weird. A church can have cash coming in, we can have people in the pews, we can even have a kind of energy ... and all of that doesn't mean that church is *healthy*. You know what I mean? The smallest church can be healthier than the biggest one. Ecclesial health is not about things you can count. There's something else... what is that? Can we name it?

When we started the Vital Congregations Initiative and I read the 7 Marks, it reminded me of another, much older list of church characteristics. A list that tried to name what churches aspire to that can't be measured. In 1910, the Presbyterian Church first wrote into the Book of Order something called the "Great Ends" of the church. We don't talk about "ends" much anymore. Do you know what it means to say something has an "end?" It means *purpose*. What is the "end" of a violin? It's not when it gets run over by a car—it's to make great music. What is the "end" of a tree? To provide shade, to bear fruit, to reproduce. Ends are something the great Greek philosopher Aristotle talked a lot about. Aristotle believed everything had an intrinsic purpose—everything exists for a reason. If something is not moving toward its end, it won't thrive, there won't be life there. But when something is moving in the direction of its end... oh, it's magical—it's just like it's supposed to be, there... there will be life!

So what's the end of the church? What are we here for? Our old fuddy duddy Presbyterian ancestors said there 6 things that define the church's end—even after 110 years, they still hold up. I want to share those 6 ends with you. They're going to sound a little antiquated. But I think you'll like them.

- 1) Proclaim the gospel for the salvation of humankind
 - Bring good news. Talk about God's love for the world and for all of us and the saving power of that love. We must be talking about things that matter
- 2) Shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God
 - This is our caring work: shelter, nurture, spiritual fellowship
- 3) Maintenance of divine worship
 - Great worship puts us in the presence of God and galvanizes us for life
- 4) Preservation of the truth

- Someone in the church needs to hear that; what we say has to be true; we have to hold science and our great story together; pursue learning; speak with humility
- 5) Promotion of social righteousness
- This is the work of justice; this means ending structural poverty and systemic racism and stopping the climate catastrophe are as important to the life of the church as the potluck
- 6) Exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world
- What do you think “on earth as it is in heaven” means? We are to model the life that Jesus describes. People will look at us and will “how they love each other; look at the joy they have.” There’s supposed to be something about the church, that people look at and say: my God, they’re figuring out what a human life is, what we are here for.

When we are living, individually and collectively, toward the Great Ends of the Church, when our resources, our time, our money, our lives are devoted to these ends... that’s that mysterious, unquantifiable, mystery of a healthy, vital church. You can’t engineer it in a long-range plan.

It is the Holy Spirit alone that makes it happen. When the Holy Spirit is in the church and we are listening and following, we are moving toward our end and fulfilling our purpose.

In today’s story, from John’s gospel, Jesus is going away. He makes a promise: when I go away, something else is coming to sustain you...

John call this “thing” the Paraclete. Paraclete is funny word. It doesn’t mean one thing. It means “one who consoles us”—one who brings comfort, holding us together through our grief. Paraclete also means helper. “The one who is called to the aid of another.” Paraclete is a legal word—it’s like an attorney who bears witness on behalf of the community. When the world tries to diminish, degrade, demean the way of Love, when we are pulled into shallower, more selfish lives, it is our divine defense attorney, the paraclete who comes to keep us clear about who we are and what we are here for.

I don’t always love John’s gospel. I especially recoil at the oppositional language—the “world is going to hate you” stuff. But here’s where I find resonance with that language. Something *is* tearing the church apart. Something about the way we have fashioned this world is preventing us from becoming fully human. Something has made us forget each other, ignore inhumane conditions... and forget that we are these fragile creatures who depend on each other and depend on God.

We absolutely do need something to come remind us *who we are* and *what the church is for*.

Come Holy Spirit.