

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts  
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on May 15, 2016 (Pentecost)**

Imagine, if you will, a box. It's quite a large box. In fact, it's so large that you are actually sitting inside of this box. Now, it's not your average *cardboard* box. It's a nice box, a fancy box. A box made of stone and wood and stained glass. You're sitting inside this box with about 150 other people, some of whom you know, some you don't; some look familiar but you can't actually remember all their names. A lot of the people inside this box are wearing red, for some reason.

Early on in your time inside this box, a colorful parade went past with a couple of kids holding sticks of fire and others holding books. At certain, apparently pre-designated, points they stand or kneel or sit. A lot. Sometimes, with no warning whatsoever, they start singing. And a couple of them walk up to a big wooden bird and start reading.

Some of the people, the ones who were in the parade, wear white robes and one person prances around in a bright red poncho. They appear to be inside this box willingly; though, in fairness, some seem to be inside more willingly than others. The facial expressions of those inside the box vary. Sometimes they close their eyes, sometimes they smile or nod their heads or look very serious. All in all, they seem rather content, though it's not at all clear what they are doing and why they are inside this box.

I could go on, but I think you get the point. It's hard to know what the first followers of Jesus would make of worship in the 21st century. They may well recognize it as some sort of religious rite or ritual. But would they connect it to their own experience of Jesus of Nazareth? Would they see their own passion for the words and wisdom of Jesus inside this box that we call the Church?

On Pentecost, we get a glimpse of the early church, and what we do on a Sunday morning here at St. John's may well look just as unfamiliar to *them* as their experience looks to *us*. Because this Pentecost event is a little wild. There was speaking in tongues and loud sounds and general chaos. In other words, just like Sunday morning worship at St. John's.

In fact there was such commotion, the crowd of onlookers that gathered to rubberneck even thought these followers of Jesus were drunk. Of course the gathered disciples weren't drunk. Drunk on the Holy Spirit perhaps but as Peter points out, it was 9:00 o'clock in the the morning; not exactly prime time for engaging in *those* kinds of spirits.

But the accusations leveled at these Christians who had come together 50 days after that first Easter Day, were just the start. For the next three hundred years they would be persecuted for their strange behavior and unusual beliefs. Even as the Christian message spread and more adherents came to know Jesus through the testimony of others, even as they gathered under cover of darkness to remember Jesus and hear stories about him and break bread together, rumors spread about this strange group. They were accused of being cannibals — there were whispers about eating body and blood; they were accused of engaging in orgies — they heard about the exchange of the “holy kiss of peace;” they were accused of being unpatriotic atheists — they refused to worship the Roman gods. Like Jesus himself, these early Christians were reviled, and mocked, and arrested, and killed. And yet they kept at it.

Now in some respects, the Church is coming full circle. Christians are no longer being persecuted, at least here in the United States, but increasingly what we do on Sunday morning is looked upon as being odd. And as society changes and becomes more and more secular, we may well have more in common with the early church than we think. The reality is that church-going, at least here in the Northeast, is no longer the norm. In a Pew Research survey that was released earlier this year, Massachusetts was tied with New Hampshire for being the *least religious state in the union*.

I see evidence of this all the time at weddings and funerals. It used to be that people, even if they weren't regular church-goers, had a general idea of how to act in the pews. It might not be entirely familiar, but they would follow along, sitting, standing, kneeling. You know, when in Rome and all that. But increasingly people show up who literally have no clue. People don't know how to open a hymnal, don't know the Lord's Prayer, don't get references to basic Bible stories, don't know what to do once they arrive at the communion rail. It's not their fault and I don't blame them for it — many of them didn't grow up going to church or they haven't been to church in a long, long time. In other words, many people experience church as something completely foreign — like the experience of those first Christians wandering into the box of the modern church.

Now, this isn't necessarily a bad thing. The early church, and the current and future church, will have a lot more in common with one another than the intervening 1,700 years when Christianity not only became legal but also took on the cloak of respectability. People who show up on Sunday morning these days *want* to be in church, rather than feeling *obligated* to be in church. And there's a big difference. You no longer face the social wrath of your neighbors if you don't take your faith seriously. Indeed most of your neighbors probably don't even go to church.

So rather than being coopted by culture, going to church has become countercultural. And that's as exciting as it is daunting for the institutional church. The future church, like the early church, will be smaller but it will also, like the early church, be more devoted. You know, as our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry likes to say, Jesus didn't come into the world to start an institution; Jesus came into the world to start a movement. And you, my friends, are part of this movement. A movement driven by and given life by and animated by the Holy Spirit; that life-giving force that is the very breath of God.

So Pentecost, the great movement that created the Church in the aftermath of Jesus' death and resurrection, offers us an opportunity to be the Church in a new way. Through the Holy Spirit, that indefinable, mysterious force that binds the Church together, we have a unique chance to experience knowing Jesus and sharing Jesus with others.

Because just as Jesus sent out the Holy Spirit to those first disciples, who were then sent out to live their faith in the world, so does the Holy Spirit send us out. Out to do the work we have been given to do. Out to spread the joy of Christ in the world. Out to stand up for justice in the face of injustice. Out to weep with those who weep. Out to rejoice with those who rejoice. Out to lift up the poor and downtrodden. Out to be the hands and feet of our Lord in a world that so desperately craves reconciliation and healing.

As much as we want to turn inward and focus on ourselves, the Spirit keeps pushing us out, beyond ourselves. Out of our comfort zones; out into the world; out of the box.