

Spirit-Filled Disciples: Acts 2:1-21, 37-39

Norwalk Christian Church, May 24, 2015, Pentecost, Year B, Disciples Together Series 1

Have you ever had one of those birthdays? The ones you dread. Because you know, after this birthday, your best days are behind you. There's no turning back. Once you're this old, it seems, nothing will ever be the same again.

This summer will be my 35th birthday, but I don't think 35 will be one of *those* birthdays. I hope not! In fact, I'm a little excited about being 35. I know, it's nothing to brag about. You've got grandkids my age. ;-)

But I'm excited. I recently read an article entitled "Big Breakthroughs Come in your Late Thirties"¹. Get this, the authors of a recent study "examined the high points of the careers of both great inventors and Nobel-Prize winning scientists, and they found that the late 30s were the sweet spot for strokes of genius."

Marti's already 35, so get ready. 35 is going to be a good year for your pastors!

Today, we are celebrating a birthday. This Sunday is the Pentecost, which means it is the birthday of the Church. And this year is the Church's 1,982nd birthday, give or take a few years. That's old! Now, mind you, I'm not talking about *this* church: Norwalk Christian Church. We are only 146 years old. I'm talking about THE church... all churches. On this day, the day of Pentecost, the church was born.

We read about it from Acts earlier. Pentecost is actually an old Jewish holiday in which the people of God celebrated the giving of the law to Moses. It was on that Jewish holiday, 50 days after Jesus rose from the dead on Easter, that the Spirit of God descended on the disciples, confused and waiting in that upper room. Peter preached his first sermon that day, and 2,000 people were baptized and dedicated their lives to the literally First Christian Church.

But here we are, 1,982 years later! Certainly, after 1,982 years, the church's best days are behind us. Have we long ago hit our prime? Are we too old to be effective? Are we so old we should just die already? 1,982 years old--that's some birthday!

The news from the past couple of weeks would suggest that our best days are, certainly, behind us. Maybe the church hit its prime in its mid-thirties, but 1,982 isn't looking good. On May 12th, the Pew Research Center, the top demographical research institute for religious and public life in America, released its 2015 Religious Landscape Study. The study was conducted in 2014, replicating a previous study done in 2007. Between the two, we are able to get a good picture of the religious landscape of the United States, and let's just say, it's rather depressing.

¹ <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/02/big-breakthroughs-come-in-your-late-30s/283858/>

The report reads, “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 is growing.... 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...among whites, blacks and Latinos...college graduates and adults with only a high school education...among women as well as men.”²

The religious group that has declined the most? Catholics and Mainline Protestants, which is us.

“About a third of older Millennials (adults currently in their late 20s and early 30s) now say they have no religion,” the study says. That’s “up nine percentage points ... since 2007...” And for the generation before them, “Nearly a quarter of Generation Xers now say they have no particular religion or describe themselves as atheists or agnostics, up four points in seven years. Baby Boomers also have become slightly but noticeably more likely to identify as religious ‘nones’ in recent years.” Now, that’s some depressing news.

Happy birthday, Church!

Why this rise of the “nones”? I’m not talking “nuns” with a “u”...those are also in decline, by the way. I’m talking “nones”, those who, when asked their religious affiliation, say “none”. It’s not that more people are being born in non-religious homes. It’s that more people who are raised religious are choosing to disaffiliate themselves with their faith tradition, choosing nothing, instead.

The Pew Center doesn’t deal with the why, but others have done studies that fill in the gaps. These researchers suggest that many people who check out of Christianity do so because they say churches are too worried about political platforms, talk about money too much (sorry, Gary), are too judgmental, too homophobic, too racist, too irrelevant.

A few weeks ago Rachel Held Evans wrote an article for the Washington Post that several of you shared with me: “Among young people [millennials] who don’t go to church,” she writes, “87 percent say they see Christians as judgmental, and 85 percent see them as hypocritical. A similar [study](#) found that ‘only 8% say they don’t attend because church is ‘out of date,’ undercutting the notion that all churches need to do for Millennials is to make worship ‘cooler.’ ”³

I don’t know if that’s good news for us, or bad news. No offense, but we at Norwalk Christian Church certainly aren’t the coolest in town. But we aren’t judgmental or hypocritical, either. “All are welcome,” we say. And we mean it!

² <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

³ http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/jesus-doesnt-tweet/2015/04/30/fb07efia-ed01-11e4-8666-a1d756do218e_story.html

According to these reports, ours is *the* message that people are looking for in a church. So, why are we not busting at the seams? Why are other churches like ours, the “mainline Christian denominations” many of whom are also non-judgmental and welcoming--why are they still among the fastest declining religious groups in America?

Maybe it's good therapy for us on this 1,982ndth birthday of the church to go back to the beginning. The Day of Pentecost, when it all began. Fire and wind. The Spirit, filling Peter and the Disciples with boldness. “Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel.” That day, alone, the church added 2,000 people. And that was only the beginning.

Keep reading the story of Acts, and you see these Spirit-filled Disciples always on the move. They're on the move because the Holy Spirit is on the move.

From there, the Gospel begins to spread throughout all of Judea. And just when they're getting comfortable, the Spirit starts showing up in Samaritans. Samaritans...people the Jews thought were nasty, half-bloods. They worshipped in the wrong way, and at a false temple. And the Spirit shows up to Samaritans, and the church has to catch up.

Then, one afternoon, the Spirit sends a church leader named Philip to a Eunuch from Africa. Eunuchs were sexual minorities, slaves who were emasculated and were barred by Jewish law from even entering the temple. But this Eunuch visited Jerusalem anyway, and on his way home, he was studying Jewish Scripture in his chariot. Philip explained to this Eunuch what he was reading, and when they came to water, this man who had been taught he was unworthy and that God couldn't love someone like him, said, “Look, there's water! Can I be baptized too?!” And they went down into the water, and he was baptized.

Later, the Spirit sends Peter to a man named Cornelius, a Gentile and a Roman Soldier. Cornelius and his entire Gentile family has received the Spirit. How could this be? He's a Gentile. God appears to Peter in a dream, and in the dream three-times a sheet filled with unclean food appears to him, with the voice of God saying, “Take and eat. Do not call unclean what I call clean.” Peter realizes that this dream is about more food, and so he goes and greets his Gentile friends as sisters and brothers, and they are all baptized.

Pretty soon after that, a man named Saul, a Jew who hunts Christians down to be persecuted, is blinded by the light of the Spirit God on the road to Damascus. When his eyes are opened, he realizes that he can no longer persecute Christians, and instead, the Spirit calls him to become the Church's first missionary. From there, the Spirit sends Paul to Gentile city after city spreading the message of God's all-inclusive love, and setting up church after church.

When Act's story ends, Paul has arrived in his last city, Rome, the home of the empire that has oppressed the Jewish people for years, the same empire that oversaw the

crucifixion of Jesus. Paul is in prison in Rome, but that doesn't stop him. Nothing will stop him. Even in shackles, Paul is filled with the Holy Spirit and shares boldly the message of God's love.

That's the story of Acts. These are the early years of the church, the church's best days--our stroke of genius. But the same Spirit that filled them on the Day of Pentecost and sent them out into their world sharing God's love still fills us today.

We, too, are Spirit-Filled Disciples. So, where is the Spirit leading us?

I have a theory about all those statistics and studies about the decline of the church. Maybe it's more of a hunch. Why do our young people leave our church and their faith when they get older? Why aren't more churches like ours busting at the seams?

My theory: because we are not bold. We've let other churches do all the talking for us! The Christian message has been co-opted by those who teach hate and judgement, who barter in fear and guilt. We may be non-judgemental, but you would never know it. We may be welcoming, but you got to show up to find out. We may be weird in all the right ways, but you may never get the chance to figure it out.

We have a story to tell, Church! The Spirit is moving, but are we keeping up? I believe our city is ready for a church like ours. They are hungry for a progressive, open-minded, inclusive Christianity. But they need us to go out and show them we are here.

We may be old, church, but I believe our best days are ahead of us. All around the world, the Spirit is moving. Old lines of division are fading away. Minds and hearts are being opened to God's love for all people. Forget the studies and statistics. All you have to do is watch the Spirit.

And what about Norwalk Christian Church? We may be the Church by the hardware store, but the Spirit is moving here, moving us outside of these walls, into every corner of this community and beyond, letting people know that they are God's beloved and that they are welcome, just as they are.

This summer, we are going to do a sermon series entitled, "Disciples Together: The Weird and Wonderful Practices of Church." We are going to celebrate all the things we do together as church, and find our boldness again. We may be weird, but this place--this fellowship of Christians--is wonderful, and there are people waiting for a church like this to share with them God's unconditional love.

And may we, Disciples of Christ, have the boldness to follow the Spirit, wherever she may lead.

Let us now prepare to come before the table of our Lord, as we sing a new song, 237: On Pentecost They Gathered. _____ will play the melody through once and then we will sing.