

The Spirit's Church
Acts 2:1-21 & 1 Corinthians 12:4-13
May 28, 2023
First Presbyterian, Luling

When I was a little girl, we learned a nursery rhyme that went like this: Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, and there's all the people. My hands seem to have worked better then, but that's the idea. I searched for this on the internet, and it's still around on YouTube. I haven't found, though, what we also said. I doubt we invented it, but we also did its opposite, with our fingers in a much more comfortable position: here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, where are all the people?

You could go any number of sermon directions using that nursery rhyme, but what it's making me think of today is that the church isn't a building. It isn't a steeple. It's the people inside that make it the church. Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors and here's all the people.

But even that isn't the whole story. There can be a church building. There can be a steeple. There can be plenty of folks inside that building. But it's only the church if the Spirit is there. The Spirit's coming started the church, and the Spirit's presence sustains it.

The Reformed theologian Karl Barth, who was part of the Confessing Church movement against the Nazi regime, which had co-opted the state church, wrote that church is not a building. The church is not an institution. The church is an event. The church isn't a thing, it is a happening. Church is the event when the people are gathered by the Holy Spirit.¹ Here's the church, here's the steeple, open the doors, and here's all the people who are gathered by the Holy Spirit. In Barth's description, church happens over and over and over. It isn't something unchanging or even stable. The Spirit creates and recreates the church.

Both the Acts passage and the 1 Corinthians passage make sure to tell us that same thing: the church is not a human creation, but a divine one, the creation of the divine Spirit. The Acts passage tells us the story of the beginning of the church. They were gathered together in one place. Here's the building, likely no steeple, here's all the people. But not a church, until the Spirit arrived, with great fanfare, fire and wind and speaking and understanding. Sometimes we call Pentecost the birthday of the church, as if it's something that happened only in

¹ Rev. Martha Langford passed this idea along to me. It appears in Barth's Church Dogmatics, volume IV, book 1, pg 651-652. Cited here: <https://www.bu.edu/cpt/files/2009/09/buckley.pdf>

the past, something we commemorate but don't actually live. But Pentecost was the beginning of the church, an event that is still happening. Our young see visions and our old dream dreams. Pentecost is still here.

The Corinthians passage tells us about different kinds of spiritual gifts. It will continue with the famous "the church is the body of Christ" metaphor, but here it's pretty straightforward. These are all gifts. People have different gifts, and that's good. No gifts are better than another. The gifts are all from the Spirit, and they're all for the common good, not for your own ego. The Spirit gives all these different gifts to the church, and the Spirit even enables us to make the most basic and essential affirmation of faith: "Jesus is Lord." The Holy Spirit makes the church possible. And not just on Pentecost, but as the Corinthians learned, in an ongoing way. The Spirit unifies the church together, without making all the members look, act, think, speak, or feel the same. All these different people can be the church together only because of the Holy Spirit.

Church and Holy Spirit are inextricably tied together, but we don't often think of them that way. I was in a workshop a couple of weeks ago that reminded me of something that should have been obvious--listen to what we say almost every week in the Apostles' Creed: I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church. That's the Holy Spirit, and the church (not just Presbyterians, not just Catholics, but the whole big overarching church), right next to each other². I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church. It's not an accident that they come one after the other, or that church appears in the paragraph dedicated to the Spirit.

Today, rather than the Apostles' Creed, we're using the PC(USA)'s Brief Statement of Faith to affirm our faith. Same thing there: We trust in God the Holy Spirit, and then the next sentence, the Spirit binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church. Again, though this is a specifically Presbyterian statement, the church here refers to all believers, the whole big worldwide church in all times and places.

The Spirit creates the church, sustains the church, leads the church into the future. The church is the visible presence of the Triune God.

I see two tendencies regarding how we understand the church. One is to consider it a human institution, with flaws and failings that are all too human. Scandals, abuse, misuse of gifts entrusted to the institution. Well, what are you going to do, this line of thinking goes. Churches are made up of humans, and

² Workshop was by Todd Ferguson, author with Josh Packard of *Stuck: Why Clergy Are Alienated from their Calling, Congregation, and Career....And What to Do About It*. Fortress Press, 2022.

humans are sinful, so the church is too. That's all true. Churches can and do make mistakes, all the time. But church is not only a human creation. Pentecost tells us, and Paul tells us, and Karl Barth reminds us, that church is first a creation of the Spirit.

The other tendency is to idolize the church and put it in the place of Jesus himself. It's an institution created by the Spirit and thus is perfect and can do no wrong. It is an institution created by the Spirit, but it's inhabited by humans and clearly imperfect.

I've wondered, and I think you have too, and I know lots of pastors and church members and interested observers, are wondering what's happening to the church. There were lots of changes and rumblings and shifts happening before the pandemic. And the pandemic accelerated all of that. Our Presbytery has closed a lot of congregations, because they didn't have enough people, or money, or especially energy, to keep going. We aren't alone in that. And it's not just Presbyterians. And yet there are some churches that are thriving, with new members and growing attendance. What is happening? I've been telling people the absolute truth, which is: I'm 100% certain that God is doing something new in the church. And, equally 100% certain that I have no idea what it is.

But I think I'm going to start adding a third sentence to that: whatever it is, the church is in the care of the Spirit. The Spirit brought us into being, and the Spirit sustains us, and the Spirit leads us into the future. We are not our own. We don't belong to ourselves. We are the Spirit's church.

Here's the church, here's the steeple. Open the doors, here's all the people AND the Spirit. Thanks be to God.