

## **Today is the Church's Birthday—And We All Need to Remember and Celebrate Our Birthdays!**

Acts 2:1-6, 14, 22, 32-33

Romans 8:14-17

Focus: When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God—Romans 8:15-16

“There was a star danced, and under that was I born.”—William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*: Act 2, Scene 1

### **First Scripture Lesson: Acts 2:1-6, 14, 22, 32-33**

Today is Pentecost, the Church's birthday—the day the Holy Spirit descended on Jesus' disciples and they began to speak in tongues. This is how, when, and where the church was born. Listen now for God's Word to us, Acts, Chapter 2:

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where the disciples were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each.

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia—all heard them speaking in their own languages about God's deeds of power. All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, “What does this mean?”

But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, “Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say.

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know—This Jesus, God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear.

### **Second Scripture Lesson: Romans 8:14-17**

Speaking of birthdays, it's not just the church that has one, we all do; and it's not just on the disciples that the Spirit descends. No, the Spirit is poured out upon all of us, making us all children of God.

That's the point Paul makes in his letter to the Romans, Chapter 8, verses 14-17. Listen now for God's Word to us:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

### **Sermon: Today is the Church's Birthday—And We All Need to Remember and Celebrate Our Birthdays!**

I have a picture, I imagine you have one too—a picture that grows more precious to me with every passing year.

It's a picture of my mother: she's sitting at the dining room table, with a yellow paper crown on her head, surrounded by her grandchildren who are also wearing identical yellow paper crowns. There's a big chocolate cake in front of her. We've just finished singing. Her cheeks are bulged out: she's taken a deep breath, and she's leaning forward to blow out the candles

"Grandma, there was no way we could fit 80 candles on it, so we put eight on—one for each decade."

It's the only picture I have of her on her birthday.

When I was growing up, Mom "did" our birthdays—the cake and ice cream, the balloons, the favorite foods, the games and presents. But for her birthday? We got a baby-sitter and Dad took her out to dinner, which, come to think of it, was probably exactly what she wanted.

But even when I was a young adult, in my twenties, thirties, and even into my forties "Mom you know, you've got a birthday coming up this month, what do you want—how would you like to celebrate?"

"Birthday? Is it my birthday this month? Really? I had forgotten all about it. You know I stopped counting birthdays years ago—"

"Mom . . ."

"No, really I mean it, it's nothing, no big deal, I don't want any fuss. Now, how is Maya liking first grade?"

It wasn't until her 80<sup>th</sup> that she finally let us overcome her resistance.

And I tell you, in that picture, I can see her as an eight-year-old. Oh, I can see she's 80 too. But the way she's leaning forward, the kids around her, her hands clasped together, the candles sparkling, the delight on her face, the light, the life in her eyes—I can see her eight-year-old self in that picture.

It's the only picture I have of her on her birthday.

We all need to remember and celebrate our birthdays. In fact, I'm so convinced of this, feel so strongly about it, that I'm now going to do something I've never done before.

I'm going to invoke all the authority of my position, all the authority of this robe and this pulpit, of this church and the church universal, and—like the pope pronouncing an infallible edict, like his holiness issuing a papal bull *ex cathedra*—I'm going to give you a binding pastoral directive that you must obey, or risk eternal damnation.

In other words, I'm going to give you The Word of the Lord. You ready? Here it comes:

Would you cut it out? I mean all this—

“Birthday? Is it my birthday this month? Really? I had forgotten all about it. You know I stopped counting birthdays years ago—it's nothing, no big deal, no fuss, please.”—stuff

Just cut it out. I know many of you do it, because I've heard you do it. And . . . you . . . need . . . to . . . cut . . . it . . . out.

It's not nothing. It's your birthday, and it's a big deal, we should remember it and celebrate it, because it's the day you came into this world, made in the image of God, a beloved child of God like no other, the day on which the angels in heaven sang Hallelujah, and the stars danced in their courses, the day that you were loved into this world where you are kept to this very day, every moment, by a loving God who knew you from the time before creation, and will love you until the end of time, AND through all eternity . . . And then some.

“In life and in death we belong to God. And nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”—When we remember and celebrate our birthdays, that's what we remember and celebrate.

So listen up—all of you who have birthdays this month (and you know who you are): We all need to remember and celebrate our birthdays. There that's my pronouncement—the Word of the Lord.

Now you may think it strange that the Word of the Lord comes to you in this way, but if the Disciples can speak in tongues, why can't I? Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of South Jersey, all heard them speaking in their own languages about God's deeds of power.

We all need to remember and celebrate our birthdays.

And we need to remember and celebrate the church's birthday too. She's about what? 1,989 years old—give or take a year or two. And yet if you look at her in the right light, with the eyes of love, she's every bit as beautiful now, as she was back then, more so in fact.

And I know my saying that can also seem strange. Because the church is an institution—people say that to me that all the time: “the church is an institution.” And it's true: the church is an institution but so is every sustained, shared human endeavor dedicated to a higher purpose.

Schools and colleges, governments, the military, our legal system, health care facilities, businesses and non-profits, our families and neighborhoods, our clubs, leagues, communities—they're all institutions: sustained, shared human endeavors dedicated to a higher purpose. And the higher those purposes, and the more they are realized, the more beautiful they are.

But now I'm in danger of defining away real and legitimate complaints.

Because when people say “the church is an institution,” what they mean is that often—far too often—it acts in its own self-interest, to protect and promote its own image, power, prestige and wealth,

steamrolling both human beings and the truth in the process, witness the recent scandals of abuse and cover-ups in the Roman Catholic and Southern Baptist Churches, not to mention how often the authority of the church and the name of Jesus has been, and is, used to put a religious veneer on some of the worst sins imaginable.

As the novelist Pat Conroy put it, “Christ must do a lot of puking when he reflects upon the ‘good works’ done in his name.”

And it’s true of all denominations, all religions, all human institutions. But a distinction needs to be made here. It may seem like splitting hairs, but I don’t think so.

It’s not the institutions per se that steamroll human beings and the truth. It’s the people with power within those institutions who are trying to protect and promote their own image, power, prestige and wealth.

The problem being of course that they conflate the good of the institution—its higher purpose—with their own selfish and narrow ends, so that they cloak their misdeeds—often their indifference, cruelty, and inhumanity—in the loftiest possible language of those higher purposes.

That’s hypocrisy, and, while it’s not unique to religion, it’s certainly endemic to it. But really, hypocrisy—dressing up our self-serving motives and actions in lofty language—knows no ideological or institutional boundaries. And when you’ve been steamrolled by it—when your love for an institution, your commitment to its higher purposes—is taken advantage of, and abused, it hurts.

And the greater the hypocrisy, the more at odds with those professed higher purposes, the more hurtful, the more outrageous and infuriating it is, particularly when it comes to the church and religion. Which is why so many people leave and vow never to come back. But it’s also why our ordination vows—the constitutional questions—our new elders and deacons just answered are so important. Listen to them again:

*Do you trust in Jesus Christ your savior, Lord of all and Head of the Church and will you fulfill your office in obedience to Him under the authority of Scripture, and guided by our confessions?*

In other words, we are to serve Christ and His church, His higher purposes. Or again:

*Will you be a friend among your colleagues in ministry loving your neighbors and working for the reconciliation of the world. And will you promote the peace unity and purity of the church serving the people with intelligence, enthusiasm, imagination and love?*

In other words, we are to serve those higher purposes with our best selves, for Christ’s sake and for the sake of others, and not merely for own—with God’s help. To keep those vows before us is the best immunization against hypocrisy.

That’s why it’s important, as church leaders, to remember our ordination vows, and why it’s important for all of us to remember and celebrate the church’s birthday. Because when we do, we remember that the church belongs to God, just as we do, and nothing in life or in death can separate the church from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that’s why we need to remember and celebrate the birthdays of this church, Westminster Presbyterian Church, because it’s here that we experience God’s love. We did so in 1999 when we celebrated the 200th anniversary of First Presbyterian Dayton, the first church in Dayton.

And we did it in 2019, when we celebrated the birth of Westminster Presbyterian Church, which was a merger of that same First Presbyterian with Third Street Presbyterian Church, Third Street having broken away from First some years earlier (our God is a God who welcomes the prodigal home). And in 2026, we will celebrate the 100th birthday of this building as the one true home of this congregation after our wandering Dayton for seven years (1919-1926) like the lost tribe of Israel. We remember and celebrate these birthdays for the same reason we remember and celebrate our own and those of the people we love: because it reminds us that in life and in death we belong to God. And nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And that's important, especially in dark and uncertain times, which, at least in our public life, these times certainly seem to be.

“How long, O Lord, how long? How can you keep letting this happen again and again and again?”—that's the question so many of God's favorites—Moses, Job, the psalmists, to name only a few—ask God, lifting it up to heaven repeatedly.

And rather than being angry about it, God seems to understand, sympathize, and even encourage this question: because our asking it shows that we still care about justice and goodness, that we have not resigned ourselves to indifference and despair, which would be a sin, and that we recognize that the present state of our world is not the way God intended it, not the way it was meant to be.

But we also have to remember that turnabout is fair play: that the same question we send up to heaven can be sent back to us on earth. “How long, my beloved children, how long? How can you keep letting this happen again and again and again?”

Because there are children in this world, children in Uvalde, Texas, for example, who will never see their ninth birthdays, but whose parents and families will forever remember them, and for us to resign ourselves to that, in indifference and despair, would be a sin:

*And Jesus said: Take care that you do not despise one of these little ones; for, I tell you, in heaven their angels continually see the face of my Father in heaven. For the Son of Man came to save the lost.*

If we suffer with him, we will also be glorified with him.

People ask me time and again what heaven will be like. And of course I don't know—not really.

But what I say is this: imagine the best possible day, the best possible moment of the best possible day, that moment when time just seemed to stand still, or better, when past, present, and future all seemed fulfilled in one eternal moment when things were just as they were meant to be. I have a picture, I imagine you have one, too—a picture that grows more precious to me with every passing year.

Now, take that picture, and raise it to the nth degree, an infinite degree—nah, heaven's way better than that. Which is why we all need to remember and celebrate our birthdays. Because by the love of God, we were made for life.

So listen up: you guys and all youse guys. Today is the church's birthday, and we all need to remember and celebrate our birthdays.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.