

On birthdays and Pentecost

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First, a confession: I'm not a big fan of my birthday.

Actually that's not quite accurate. I like my birthday just fine, but as an inherently private person I'm not a big fan of others' expectations of how I should spend my birthday, so I'm deliberate about keeping the actual date under wraps.

There's a whole host of reasons why I resist the norms of birthday celebrations, why "doing something special" doesn't appeal to me, but ultimately my reasoning is terribly dull and practical: at the end of whatever hoopla people engage in on their birthdays, after 24 hours of sucking whatever specialness can be sucked out of the day, what has changed?

Nothing.

You are still you. I am still me. Life is still life.

Perhaps you are a little fuller from eating cake. Perhaps you are a little more tired from partying hard. Perhaps you had a good laugh, maybe a good cry. Likely your wallet's a little lighter.

But birthdays don't change anything—or, to use religious language, birthdays aren't conversion experiences.

Which is why I find myself perplexed this year as I (re)consider the annual "Pentecost is the church's birthday" liturgical theme.

Now maybe your church doesn't celebrate Pentecost as the birth of the early church. In fact, Pentecost may not be a significant Sunday in the life of your congregation at all. But I've been a part of some churches that sing "Happy Birthday" during worship and even pass out cupcakes during the children's time on Pentecost, and this year I'm wondering: "Why?"

Why sing “Happy Birthday” to ourselves as the church? What impact does it have on our daily and spiritual lives to celebrate the church’s birthday? Do our modern birthday habits contribute anything to our understanding of Pentecost? And how (if at all) does the church’s birthday celebration convert us year after year?

The Pentecost story that we celebrate as the birth of the early church was a dramatic, wind-rushing, flame-throwing conversion experience:

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 violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:1-4)

On the birthday of the church, something changed. Those disciples changed: their fears changed to audacity, their tongues flowed with fluency. The community around them changed: it multiplied and bridged divides as the story of Jesus was heard in many languages.

In our Pentecost birthday celebrations this coming Sunday, what do we expect to change?

Anything?

Despite my personal apathy toward birthdays, I think there’s potential value in using the Pentecost birthday theme in worship as a mechanism to love on ourselves a little bit as the church (especially as we strive to respond to [the statistical decline of American Christianity](#)), in order to change and ease the church’s anxieties and to nurture our joy so that we might dare more brazenly to be church.

Notice: *in order to. In order to inspire change.* If we’re celebrating Pentecost-as-birthday, a pastoral and liturgical purpose beyond chocolate cake is worth identifying.

So perhaps Pentecost-as-birthday emboldens the church toward change. But regardless of cake and candles, what will be different—in our personal living, in our congregational living—because of this year’s church birthday? **How will Pentecost convert us this Sunday?**

- Will our bones be turned loose and set dancing? (Ezekiel 37:1-14)
- Will the beauty and glory of God finally undermine our arrogance until we kneel to care for the earth? (Psalm 104)
- Will we believe at last that the Spirit is boundless in speaking through the young men and women who are protesting in the streets, who are dreaming new dreams via social media—and, believing that the Spirit is at work, will we finally trust and follow the leadership of these new prophets? (Acts 2:1-21)
- Will Pentecost bring a conversion of the church to hope, to possibility, to faith? (Romans 8:22-27)

Birthdays may not be days of guaranteed change in our individual lives, but Pentecost celebrates and continues to call the church to conversion. How will we celebrate and change this year?

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