

OPENING

My earliest memory of Pentecost comes from my childhood. I was in the parish hall after the service in the church that I grew up in, and I recall a gigantic birthday cake with red frosting and countless flaming candles. We were celebrating the “Birthday of the Church.” One young person from the congregation was to be selected to blow out the candles of this massive cake. And I wanted to be chosen.

I was not, and so I sang “Happy Birthday” along with everyone else through my disappointment. As the song ended, the young boy who had been chosen summoned a deep, deep breath to blow out the candles. “That could have been me!” I thought. The young boy exhaled a healthy gust of breath and the candles all went out.... But only for an instant.... Suddenly they reappeared as healthy flames. The young man drew another breath and gave it another shot.... Only for the flames to again appear above the candles. (You know what I was thinking: “I could have done a better job than him.”)

But you know the reason, and I soon was to discover why the candles still were lit, the adults had placed “trick candles” on to the cake—non-extinguishing ones that would keep relighting despite the boy’s best efforts.

The reason that they were trying to go for: You cannot blow the Holy Spirit out. The Holy Spirit came like a dove, comes like water, comes like fire. It never goes away. Sometimes people think that Jesus lived a long time ago, all the stories in the Bible happened a long time ago. But God keeps showing up, God does not go out. At Baptisms, you always hand the candle to the parent or the Godparent, but tell them it’s okay if it goes out. Jesus is still here. Same thing with the light in Aumbry for the reserved sacrament. The Holy Spirit blows where it will, even to this day.

PENTECOST as BIRTHDAY

Pentecost is a little scary, all those tongues, and flames, and drunkenness, it’s a little harder to hold onto this holiday versus Easter and Christmas.

Pentecost is joyous and festive and also dangerous.

It's Much easier to hold on to this holiday and think about it as a Birthday and that’s how we are going to do it with a cake for the Church’s (capital C) 1989th birthday.

First question: Who is invited?

Everyone, that's where the craziness begins. Think of the voices in the lesson. All those voices come together and somehow sense is made of those languages. There was French and Spanish and Arabic and Greek and Filipino. Everyone is invited to the birthday party. It's for everyone.

That means we are going to need a pretty big cake.

What should we expect? What is going to happen at this birthday party?

Pentecost is the type of party where you might not know everyone, your blood pressure might be raised as you enter the room, everything might not be scripted to a "T", it might be one of those parties where the cardinal rule of social gatherings, in our culture at least, that you not talk about religion, sex or politics..... might indeed be broken.

To return to the trick candles and birthday cake—I was surprised to learn when researching this sermon that the "magic" element in Trick candles is magnesium, added to the wicks so that when the candle is blown out, the ember ignites the magnesium, which then catches the candles' vapor. The magnesium used here is the same principle employed on the fuse of a dynamite stick—trick candles are banned in Canada, Trick Candles are a little bit dangerous.

My wife and I were joking recently that, because of COVID, we have not had to go to as many birthday parties of those under the age of 5. Those birthday parties, if you are unfamiliar with them are chaotic, unpredictable, exciting, hard to handle, even a little bit dangerous. So in other words, they are like Pentecost: who knows what's going to happen. So it is with the party that we have been invited to and celebrate today

What should we wear?

Now, we wear the bright Red today because of the Pentecost Fire, most of you heeded those instructions but, in merry Old England, I am told, they wear white, and Pentecost is known as "Whitsunday," as they celebrate baptisms on that day.

It fits that God so often appears as fire in Scripture, but white still works as a fashion choice because, as the lowliest of Cub Scout or Girl Scouts knows, the red fire in a flame is actually the least hot. I did some research, and here's the stats: the dark red flame is only about 1000 °F while the white part of the fire and the flame is almost 3000 °F!¹

So you add Baptism on top of it, we don't have a Baptism today, but we will renew our vows, and gets even MORE exciting.

Do you remember what you wore when you got baptized?

You probably wore white that was your birthday in the church, that's when we each individually joined the church. Today is the Church's birthday, but we all joined the church on our Baptisms

Mark's Baptismal Candle: we light every year, we might even have cake. That way, we remember what happened when he got baptized, and when he joined the church and what happened.

Baptisms can be dangerous too. Think of the white robes that people would wear "Down to the river" to get baptized in a moving body of water. They would get dunked, fully immersed, holding their breath for dear life 3 times as they were reborn as new people. That's weird, a little scary.

That's what Pentecost is like, what Baptism is like, being a disciple of Jesus is like. That's an exciting, dangerous activity.

The Church loves that story, linking it to the Flood and Noah surviving it, the world reborn after being washed over completely, or likening it to the Israelites coming up out of the water of the Red Sea in the Exodus. Or the story of Christ's resurrection

What do we take away from Pentecost? What are the celebration's "party favors"?

The feast of Pentecost has this mixture of vulnerability and bravery in the midst of danger, shows the unitive Power of the Holy Spirit. It serves as a contrast to the confusing mixed messages witnessed at the Tower of Babel. We come away from Pentecost then with a renewed understanding and recognition of our individual and corporate gifts.

¹ [What Are the Colors of a Fire & How Hot Are They?](#)

CONCLUSION

Birthday Party: What do you get for the person that has everything?

The gift is us, the gift are the newly baptized, the gift is the renewal of this amazing life of discipleship in the Christian faith.

Flannery O'Connor

“The truth will set you free, and it will make you odd.”²

Being Baptized works along the same lines, welcome to this new crazy community known as the church, the water is great, but you cannot predict what is going to happen next.

So “Happy Birthday” to the Church today, another trip around the Sun.

We know that the Spirit provides beyond our hopes and expectations. The feast of Pentecost, with that mixture of vulnerability and bravery in the midst of danger, shows the Holy Spirit's power. On this day and always, we lay claim to our Baptismal Identity, with the color red (or white!) as our dress code to this Birthday party, with Tongues of Fire proclaiming whose we are.

AMEN

² [A source for the quotation “You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you odd” | Mike A. Shapiro \(wordpress.com\)](#)