

FOR EACH AND FOR ALL

June 12, 2011

After all these years, my guess is that most of you know that I share my birthday with Jesus. But I have to tell you that, even though that's so, I've never been shortchanged in the present department. However, since Jesus and I share the same birthday, it's sometimes hard for me to remember which present is which! Is it for Jesus...or is it for me? But I do remember one. In 1963, my birthday present was a bright red, 26" Schwinn Typhoon. I thought I could fly like the wind on that bike named for the wind...especially downhill!

Is there a birthday present you really remember; one that stands out in your minds above all the rest? Any? A saxophone! And, by golly, you're still blowing wind through that saxophone, aren't you, Gary? What birthday present do you remember?

Birthday presents are what we get when we celebrate birthdays because birthdays are about getting presents, aren't they? They're not about giving presents; they're about getting presents when it's our birthday...except for one of the most colorful and dynamic personalities that this church has ever known in its membership. Some of you will remember Bob Etter. Bob, for his 80th birthday, took his whole family to San Francisco for a week: kids, grandkids, in-laws; they all went to San Francisco for a week. On his 80th birthday, Bob *gave* presents to his family and he did it, you know, so that he could enjoy the best present of all...a week with all those people who were the closest to his heart...his family. He *gave* a gift instead of expecting to *get* a gift on his birthday.

Giving gifts on our birthday rather than receiving them is unexpected. We don't expect to give gifts on our birthdays. We expect to get them. It's upside down. But that's exactly what happens today...on this day that is the birthday of the church...on Pentecost...because, on this day, God gives gifts on the birthday of God's church. With a mighty wind – yes, like a typhoon – and with tongues of blazing fire like a conflagration, God gives the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the church. And in the giving of those gifts, the church is born and renewed because the Holy Spirit gives everybody a gift...each one. Listen:

...suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a 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 one of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and all of them began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

In his Pentecost sermon, Peter said that we shouldn't be surprised because this is exactly what God promised. God said:

I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

On Pentecost, the Spirit filled the entire house: from attic to basement and every closet and corner in between! The Spirit filled the entire house. A tongue of fire rested on each one. No one was left cold or unkindled. As the Apostle Paul explains it to the Corinthian Church:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but it's the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but it's the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it's the same God who activates all of them in each one.

Do you hear what Paul is telling us about the gifts of the Spirit? He's telling us that each gift is as unique as each of us is unique. But the other side of that coin is that all these gifts come from fullness of the same God, and each gift is equal. None is more or less valuable than the other. Indeed, if we try to do that – if we try to make one or more or less valuable – if we deny the value and the significance of even one gift...even one...then what we're really doing is denying the goodness and the fullness of our God. Each gift is just as precious as the next.

Yes, God gives us each gifts – every one of us – and the challenge in that is not being left out. The challenge is deciding what the gifts are...it's discerning the gifts...and it's receiving the gifts...it's welcoming what God gives us...and then it's using those gifts, the gifts of the Spirit that God gives us to be used. With the gifts of the Spirit there is no regifting. You can't wrap it up and give it away again...and you can't return it...and you can't hide it in the bottom of a drawer or in the back of a closet. God gives us each gifts...every one of us...and they're each just as valuable as the next.

Now, friends, that is counterintuitive (isn't that a great word, counterintuitive? It's one of those contemporary words...I love it!); it is counterintuitive in our stratified culture. In our culture, everyone and everything has a place on the spectrum of value and importance. Henry Ford is the man who put America on wheels. With his moving assembly line, Henry Ford built automobiles that were cheap enough for almost everyone to afford them. Henry Ford, in his mind and his industry, was focused on necessity not luxury, and so the Model T changed the world. And Henry Ford said of the Model T: *You can have any color you want...as long as it's black!* That's exactly right. ***You can have any color you want, as long as it's black!***

Chevrolet, however, said you can have any color you want. And by the way, said Chevrolet, we've got a six-cylinder engine, too! And so the competition and the stratification begin. I saw a black car a week ago in Green Bay. It didn't really remind me of a Model T. It was a brand new Bentley! Now, that's luxury...and that's stratification...and that's status.

Well, this stratification that we're so fond of is about more than cars! We do it to people, too, and we look at people and we say,

Now who is it in this room who has the gift that's most important...and who is it whose gifts, you know, we could live without?

We call it ***hierarchy*** don't we, this stratification in our culture? That word, ***hierarchy***, is from the Greek word ***hieros***, which means temple. So, now you know the church is the source of this stratification of these distinctions. The pope...cardinals...archbishops...bishops...priests...religious orders...and, finally, ordinary folks: it's a hierarchy, and the author is the church. But ***hierarchy*** – that is, ***holy stratification*** – is the antithesis...it's exactly the opposite...of Pentecost. Everyone on Pentecost is equally precious and important. As Martin Luther said so powerfully and so simply: ***We believe in the priesthood of ALL believers.***

Though *hieros* means *holy*, *hierarchy* is anything but! We know about hierarchy in our contemporary American culture and in its political wars, don't we? It's *capitalism* versus *communism*. It's *individual* versus *the community*. And *common good* is a phrase I have learned fairly recently is code language in our contemporary American political wars for socialism. Did you know that? Common good is code language for socialism.

But in the genius of God, it's not either/or: capitalism or socialism, individual or community. It's both/and. Did you hear what it says in the Pentecost story? ***To EACH, to each is given a manifestation of the Spirit*** (to each...each one of us matters)...***to each one is given a manifestation of the Spirit...for the COMMON good***. It's not either/or. It's both/and. And the news in that is that our gifts, though they are unique and individual, are best used and most enjoyed not for private benefit, but for communal blessing.

We each have gifts. Each gift is unique. Each gift matters equally. And each gift is given for the common good. Each of us has gifts. Jeff, do you know what your gift is? Do you know? Well, we need to help you find out. Now it's pretty clear, Kathy, what your gift is and you blessed us with your gift of music this morning. But I bet there are others. I know there are others. Jack, do you know what your gift is? We'll have to help you find out. Each of us has a gift of the Spirit...each one of us. And each one of us is equally precious.

The gifts of the Spirit are for each of us, and they're for all of us. Because the Spirit gives, we too must give. And that means that the Holy Spirit inspires some of our greatest conversions, our greatest changes: from *getters...to givers*, what a change! From *hopeless...to hopeful*, what a change! From *defeated...to determined*, what a change! Those disciples, as they gathered in that room and shut the windows and the doors and huddled together, were afraid they had no future. They didn't know where they were going or what they were going to do. They didn't know what tomorrow held...until the Holy Spirit came. And, when the Holy Spirit came, all doubts, all disappointments, all their concerns evaporated in the power of the wind and the fire of the Spirit. And the church came alive.

The Holy Spirit gives birth to a church where there is no hierarchy of significance. Instead, there is simply a community of sharing. And the Holy Spirit takes individual glorification and weaves it together for the common good. It's not about ***what I can get here for me***. No, the church is about ***what I can contribute here for we***.

Martha Kuehn, as many of you know, died a week ago yesterday. Martha is Jerry Kuehn's daughter – Pastor Jerry Kuehn, who you all have gotten to know because Jerry and I are walking partners. Jerry has been here as a part of the life of this church from time to time, and he's offered pastoral services when Peggy and I weren't available. And Martha – Jerry's daughter – came to be known by this congregation because she has been here with Jerry, and because she went on retreat with us last September to Moon Beach. Martha died a week ago yesterday. Martha was born with Down Syndrome. She lived twenty-one years beyond the prediction of her doctors at her birth.

Now Martha is one of those people who has gifts, but her gifts really aren't much valued by the hierarchy. Yet Martha's gifts are precious beyond price to our God. Martha, even Martha, contributed to the common good and served a purpose. At Calvary Lutheran Church (Jerry's and Martha's church), Martha was a greeter and a communion steward. She competed in the Special

Olympics and, at her funeral visitation, the trophies were on display. And she worked at ASPIRO. In those settings where Martha could contribute, where she served a purpose, she felt very good about herself, and she had a phrase to express that. She said: *I feel big!*

How often do we feel small? How often do our gifts seem insignificant or ill-defined? And how often do we try to make ourselves big by making others small?

The Holy Spirit gives gifts to each of us. The gifts are significant, and they are abundant. The Holy Spirit gives gifts to all of us, and the gifts are given for the common good.

Receive the Holy Spirit! says Jesus, because the gifts are for each of you and for all of you. So name the gifts...own the gifts...use the gifts...and share the gifts because, when we share the gifts, each of us is precious...each one. And when we share the gifts, all of us, together, are blessed.

So, friends, it's time for us to each feel big...as big as God's gifts. It's time for the church to be big...as big as God's love. When we do, we are the living presence of Christ in this world. When we do, we receive and become the greatest gift that God has ever given...the gift of God's peace!

Receive the Holy Spirit! On this birthday, let the gifts of the Spirit be the ones that we never forget...the ones that we always use...every day...every day...every day! Amen.

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