

“Handle with Care!”

Ephesians 4:1-6, 11-16; Acts 2:1-21 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – May 24, 2026

Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might receive the unity of the Spirit and be part of building the body up in love. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Happy Pentecost! There are practices within the Christian tradition – most often used for “children’s moments – that describe this holiday as the Church’s “birthday”. And there are ways in which that makes sense. But in a larger sense, such a framing trivializes what is happening here, complete with props like cake and birthday candles, as if the fire involved can be reduced to tiny flames aimed at granting you wishes. Pentecost is, in fact, quite a serious matter. Your birthday is a Big Deal. My birthday is a Big Deal. But the truth is that before any of us were born, lots of other humans already existed. When the church came into being, it was Something Entirely New. “Birthday” just doesn’t quite capture the fullness of what is going on here.

I don’t know that there are truly appropriate metaphors for Pentecost, but one might be the image of a volcano. Pentecost was the Holy Spirit erupting into the world with great impact and creating something that wasn’t there before, like a new island chain that forms from the magma. If we want to understand what the Church is – what it is for and how to be faithful within it – we need to explore the ways in

which that eruption happened and what it changed. We cannot celebrate authentically without a clear sense of what we are celebrating.

And celebration is key here. God did not hand humans the Church and say, “This is your burden now. It’s going to be really hard and tedious, and you’ll probably mess it up.” The Holy Spirit arrived as a promise fulfilled, a gift, a blessing. The Church is something to be celebrated. It is essential that we keep that in mind. Because sometimes it is hard and tedious!

So let’s look at what we learn about the nature of the Church from this origin story. There are some key phrases that give us clues. “All together in one place” – the Church congregates; we share life in common; we hang out together. “Speak in other languages” – the Church cannot be contained within one language or one culture or one society. “Bewildered... amazed and astonished” – the Church doesn’t always make sense at first; it often defies our expectations for how the world works. “God’s deeds of power” – the Church does not exist for its own glory or its own purposes, but rather to carry out the mission of God on earth. “Everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” – the Church is constructed to be an entrance into God’s redemption and liberation for any who will walk through it.

There is much cause for rejoicing in these words. “Good tidings of great joy for all people,” as the angels sang. But this is not a simple joy or an individual joy. Because one of the fundamental lessons of Pentecost is that we can’t do Church on

our own; Church always involves other people. And not just the people we already know and have learned to love, but lots of other people – some of whom we may have preconceived notions about, some of whom do things really differently than we do, and some of whom are just plain annoying.

So it is imperative that we continually remind ourselves about the joy of Pentecost – the truth that God handed us this vast and beautiful diversity that is the Body of Christ as a gift, a blessing. Because it is, in fact, also really hard sometimes. And so, this year, we are embarking on a sermon series to think about how to “church” faithfully, that is, how to carry ourselves with spiritual maturity and love. If you think about it, a Church that is born in a moment of wind and fire, with the good news erupting in 15 languages at once, is one that is bound to experience moments of friction and conflict. So how do we navigate those tensions in Christ-like ways, rather than contributing to tearing apart the bonds of love the Spirit has gifted us?

The passage we heard from Ephesians is going to be our guiding scripture throughout this series, so I want us to spend a little more time with it today. We’re going to practice what is called *lectio divina* (or “holy reading”) with these words for a moment. I’m going to read the scripture again, twice, slowly, and I want you to listen for the words or phrases that stand out to you. If you like and it will help you focus, you could grab a pen and write them down as they hit you, but you might want to just close your eyes and focus on listening to what the Spirit is saying to you. [read Eph]

So what did you hear? [Sharing.] This passage was read at my ordination almost 25 years ago, because I have always found it one of the most compelling descriptions in scripture of how church should work. We don't all do the same thing, but we respect and give thanks for the work of each other person. We don't use church as a place to work out our issues or desires for power and authority, but understand that this is a community of service and mutual love. We don't do "fake" or duplicitous here, but instead carry ourselves as honestly and lovingly as we can.

As I mentioned before, a birthday candle is terrible representation of the fire of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the Holy Spirit is way bigger than that, with way more power and might. The fire of the Holy Spirit truly does require us to "Handle with Care!" The Spirit is moving all throughout the church, and if we don't handle it carefully, we can do damage, to others, to ourselves, to the church itself, and to the rest of the world. We cannot take this responsibility lightly. But we must always remind ourselves that this burden is a blessing. The Church is a gift from God; it is a cause for rejoicing. Our complicated diversity is a cause for celebration! The fire is beautiful, even if it's not entirely safe. The wind is invigorating, even if it chaps our skin sometimes. So let us receive this gift from God with gladness and re-commit ourselves to being the Church and promoting the body's growth in building itself up in love. Hallelujah and Amen!