

May 31, 2020 Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21, Psalm 104:25-35, 1 Corinthians 12:3b-13, John 20:19-23

“Graduation”

For the past number of years one of the pleasures I have enjoyed is attending Grade 8 graduation ceremonies at Lively District Secondary School. It may seem strange to hear me refer to attending a ceremony such as this as a pleasure but it really has been. I attend because the Vestry at Christ Church supports an annual cash award to two graduating students who, according to the teaching staff, exhibit the qualities of good citizenship. So, every year for the past 10 at least, I have stood on the stage in the gymnasium as two students who have no idea who I am come forward and we get our picture taken and they get a medallion and a cheque. The rest of the ceremony is wonderful as well as all the students celebrate an achievement that will influence the rest of their years in some way or another. I love to see the energy and enthusiasm in these students as they enjoy the video they have put together based on the memories of the year. This year we won't be gathering in the same way and that saddens me but I am thankful that another class of Grade 8 students will be launched into their future. Who knows how the world will be influenced by the class of 2020? Graduations are like that. They are full of potential and they are affected by the past and they are moments of change.

The people of God faced a moment of change during a festival of Pentecost in Jerusalem over 2000 years ago. A small group of men and women who had become disciples of a man named Jesus from the little town of Nazareth were about to graduate into becoming the start of something that would change the world. While they were gathered in an upper room praying God blessed them with the equipment they would need to become the Church - the called out ones. This diverse group guided by the Holy Spirit would show the Roman Empire what real strength and courage looked like and the seeds sown in that moment would grow and blossom and spread like few other movements have ever spread. Against incredible odds this small group of men and women would set in motion a sequence of events which would cause a group of similar believers far into the future to be formed in the communities of Lively and Copper Cliff in order to work at the same project of God. It has been a pleasure for me to watch and participate in that work of God in this parish and it is all due to God's Holy Spirit which continues to be poured out on all flesh. Young men still see visions and old men still dream dreams and for all that I give thanks to God. The feast of Pentecost, which had been celebrated since the days of Moses, was changed in its focus on that day for the followers of Jesus Christ. It no longer was simply a Jewish feast it was now a birthday party - the birth of the Church - and a graduation ceremony as these new leaders were sent into the world to witness to the Good News of Jesus Christ. You and I stand on their shoulders as those Grade 8 grads I mentioned earlier stand on our shoulders. An ongoing - generation after generation project of showing the world who God is, what God is like, and what real life can be. Whether we are isolated or not this work goes on as it has for over 2000 years as we participate in this chain of life. People with such a wide array of differences are formed into a family and empowered to do some pretty amazing things. They are

also witnesses to miracles of healing and hope. This is the Church. This is who we are. Thanks be to God.

In an attempt to explain this concept to new believers in the city of Corinth St. Paul wrote at least two letters to address some of their questions. In the 12th chapter of his first letter St. Paul speaks about an extraordinary reality in the family of Jesus' disciples. That reality is that everyone counts and everyone has something to contribute. This was an unusual idea in a culture that admired wealth and power. The lowly slave was most often simply ignored and yet St. Paul says that even one whom society does not value has value and purpose within this company of believers. He uses the image of a body to try to get the idea across explaining later in the chapter that the eye cannot say to the hand 'I have no need of you' or that the foot cannot say to another part, 'because I am not a hand I am not a part of the body'. In our culture we not be able to appreciate the absolute amazement that would have accompanied this proclamation of the truth of God's family but it truly was a remarkable statement. The birth of the Church and the leaders appointed to guide its growth demonstrated the reality of this truth. Over and over again as we read about the first steps this Church took we read about the welcome that all received and how those gifts were shared. In one passage we read, "All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need." and later, "they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching, the fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers and God added to their number daily". There was definitely a unique unity among those who called Jesus Christ Lord and that, among other things, was very attractive. Unity amidst diversity is an invention of the God of this universe. Most leaders try to create unity through conformity but God seems to delight in weaving diverse parts into a beautiful pattern in order to accomplish something. I have witnessed this happening again and again as I am asked to help with the leadership of weekend events. A small team of very different people come together for the common purpose on a very short time-line and, through God's Holy Spirit, become a unified team. I have witnessed this happening over a dozen times and it amazes me each time. Each small gift or talent that a team member brings is woven by God into something beautiful in events like this and in events like our lives together as a parish family. Normal parish activities are not usually quite as intense as a closed weekend event but the weaving and gift sharing is still powerful. Think of the 'big' Church events we hold such as: Yard Sales, Church Dinners, Fairs and Teas - and count the number of people who contribute in some way to the success of that endeavour. Each small or large contribution is used by God to accomplish the task along with the efforts of all participants. This is a picture of what was birthed as the Holy Spirit came upon that small group of Jesus' disciples. What were 120 people going to be able to do in the city of Jerusalem or the entire Roman empire in the first century? History tells that the Roman Empire fell but the Church has continued. This is the power of God brought into the world through willing and obedient followers of Jesus Christ. We are all potential graduates of this wonderful and world changing message who are being formed and equipped to better serve the Risen Jesus in bringing a message of hope and reconciliation to a world that desperately needs such a message.

During these weeks of self-isolation and adaptation to the Covid-19 restrictions we are still part of that world changing Body of Christ. Each of us brings particular abilities and dreams into the mix and we are all given the opportunity to share those gifts with the Church of which we are part as well as sharing them with the world around us. The director of the operation is God through the Holy Spirit. As we become more attuned to listening to God's voice through reading scripture, speaking with other believers, trying (and sometimes failing) to share the Good News of Jesus, and reaching out with care and compassion to others we will be witnesses to what God is able to do in the face of what looks like overwhelming barriers. The Pandemic is changing the way we look at the world and, when we do get to meet together again, some of those changes will be seen in the way we organize our Church services. The gifts that we all bring are still the same and the purpose for which they were given is still the same but the delivery method may need to be altered.

Graduation ceremonies are fun for me to attend because I am given a chance to see some of the potential that God has brought into the world and I can give thanks for a Creator that thinks diversity is an aid, rather than a barrier, to living an active and devoted life of grace. As we celebrate the feast of Pentecost and recall that wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit let us pray for a continuation of that gift of God's Holy Spirit as it empowers another generation of Jesus followers and prepares the message for the next generation and the generations after that. We stand on the shoulders of those first disciples who stood on the shoulders of those who came before them. We stand at the beginning of the next portion of the line of believers as we pray that the new set of graduates from high school, elementary school, colleges and universities will discover this truth as well - that God loves them and wants them to experience true life in Jesus and share with everyone their gifts.

