

# St Paul's Episcopal Church Camden, New Jersey



## Pentecost 2012

### A Message from the Rector:

Dear Friends, A while back some of the Roman Catholic hierarchy weighed in on the discussion of women, contraception, and public health. In a conversation about it a friend said, "I don't understand how women can remain in the Roman Catholic Church!" As I thought about it - and my mind wandered beyond health and womanise' issues - I realized that the same question might be asked about the Episcopal Church - or any other, for that matter. Within our own church the record has been less than stellar, what with fractioning relationship, law suits and property fights! It's actually downright disgraceful! And while accusing fingers are pointed, we might just as well look to the money scandals among evangelical Christians or the ethnic rivalries among the Orthodox. There is enough out there to discourage every Christian, and over the years I have had my share of these "a-pox-on-all-your-houses" moments. But when gathered with the congregation around the Altar, hearing the Word and sharing it in the Eucharist, all else recedes into the realm of the unimportant. This, I believe, is how most Christians stay connected to their less than perfect communities.

That the church is at its best when it is at worship leads many to deplore the institution. It fuels the notion that institutions, in general, are bad. The train of thought runs like this. The church is "spiritual" and therefore losses its purpose when it gets involved with money, property, power, and prestige. There are enough examples out there to add a touch of truth to this kind of thinking. It was good that the Roman Emperor Constantine put an end to the persecution of Christians, but it was sometimes less than helpful when church leaders began to be absorbed into and become part of the machinery of the Roman state. Episodes in church history like the Crusades or the Spanish Inquisition are prime examples of how the church leadership can abuse power as badly as anyone else. Closer in time and space are the too well known stories of "country club Episcopalians" brokering financial deals and big city Roman Catholic cardinals saddling up to political bosses. To many - possibly to most - the church is seen to be an institution working in its own interest. Churches jockey for position in the public arena and often go to great - and embarrassing - lengths to conceal their own mistakes. They are generally seen to have their hand out to relieve people of their disposable income. Those of us who are part of the life of the church know only too well about the care and maintenance of the institution. We instinctively want to see it grow and prosper. We strive to build up our diocesan or parochial staff. We seek to expand and improve our programs. And - always! - we agonize over the care and

maintenance of our buildings and properties. Outsiders can be excused for seeing us as just another institution. "Anti-institutional" Christians have much to deplore.

That the church is spiritual is undeniable Gospel truth. "**God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.**" (John 4:24) But we need to remember that we are using the word "spiritual" in a Christian context. It is not a vapid, airy sort of reality. It translates directly into the flesh and blood life that we live. One of my favorite anecdotes is of the encounter I had with a radio preacher out at Canoe Creek State Park in central Pennsylvania. (I call it "The Fat Guy from Pennsauken" story.) He saw our New Jersey license plate and waddled over to our car shouting, "Hey, you from Jersey?" So we began a conversation in which I learned that he had moved from Pennsauken to work for an evangelical radio station which beamed God's Word all over the place. When he found out that we were in Camden - actually lived in Camden - he got very serious and said, "You can't help those people by being one of them. It's better to proclaim the Word, pure and undefiled." I thought about that and realized that is the difference between his version of "spiritual" and what catholic Christians believe. For us "**the Word became flesh and lived among us ...**" (John 1:14) Jesus said to his disciples, "**This is my body ... this is my blood**" and so it is. Our God lives and moves in the midst of this tangible world. He embraces it. He loves it. He touches and heals what is broken. He suffers and dies with it, and, without the slightest trace of escapism, he has overcome it. The place where his Good News is proclaimed is the real, physical world. The means by which it is proclaimed is through the lives of real flesh and blood humans - few of us are what you might call pure and undefiled.

If such be our truth, then it is not surprising that our "spiritual" church is always found in the flesh and blood reality of our world. If Jesus is Lord - and I believe he is! - it could not be anywhere else. When God moves among us as a community of people - well - we tend to organize ourselves in ways that are institutional. "**So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. 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. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts.**" (Acts 2:41-46) From the beginning the believers identified the way for people to enter the community - baptism. They made provision for the hearing of the Word and the breaking of the bread - proclamation, teaching and sacrament. They organized community life and outreach - mission. Later they would provide by the laying-on-of-hands and sending forth apostles for the spread and continuation of the community. Like it or not, the church became an institution.

Even from those early New Testament days institutional problems arose. What sort of people were to be part of the community? Jews? Samaritans? Greeks? What were to be the signs of true membership? Circumcision? Adherence to the Law? What about the management of the communities offerings and assets and the distribution of alms? The story of the first Christians unfolds in the Acts of the Apostles, and it is echoed in the various apostolic letters. Part of the unfolding story is about the developing of the institution we call the church. Like it or not, this is part of the reality of who we are and what we have. All of that can not and should not be dismissed, but should be appreciated in the context of the whole story.

***“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 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 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)*** The powerful presence of the Spirit of God filled the place and the first believers. It enabled them to worship and proclaim. It empowered them to speak both singly and collectively - as individuals and as community. God in his fulness continues to live in and with his people - the God who is at the heart of the universe, whose heart is revealed to us in Jesus, literally breathes real Life into his people. Through his people that real Life is breathed into believers from generation to generation. It's who we are. It's why we're here. The Life that was given to us is the power of Love - the essence of God, the reality of God we see in the face of Jesus.

To follow through with our calling we have an institution. It's a way of ensuring that the life of the spirit can continue to be passed from one generation to another. Like the tools that any worthwhile workman uses, the institution of the church should be kept clean and in good repair so that it can do what it was designed to do. Above all, it should not be allowed to become a replacement for the God who is spirit and who is worshiped in spirit and in truth. At all times, but especially as the Day of Pentecost approaches in our calendar of prayer and praise, let's focus on the One who breathes the power of his Love into our hearts and give ourselves to him who picked up the Scriptures in the synagogue and read from the Prophet Isaiah, ***“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” (Luke 4:18-19)*** The institution is only a means to an end. When our heart and our actions are with Jesus, then we are living in the power of the Spirit who leads us into all truth. Then we are the Church.

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