

ASC Pentecost 2013 G. West

Today is a day that we celebrate the birthday of the church. I guess that it is a time where we should assess how we are doing and where we are going.

But first, I think we should take a look at that first Pentecost in Jerusalem where the disciples had gathered after the ascension which the church celebrated just over a week ago. Perhaps they viewed themselves to have been like orphans.

Once again Jesus' disciples are meeting together and the same questions seem to be on their minds as we have heard before—"Now what?" It seems that once again they are clueless as to what has happened; what is happening; and what they should do.

Before you agree and criticize them, I think that many of us are in the very same position as we are confronted with the life of Jesus. What does it mean for me and what should I do?

Years ago, I heard a story about a very valuable gem which was sent by God to his people. Those people had a sense of the value so they carefully put it into a box for safe-keeping and each generation added more gems to the outside of the box for centuries. The box became a very ornate object but the contents of the box seemed to lose its message so that generations soon had no idea what was in the box and it was the box itself which became the object of adoration. That box became very heavy indeed.

You probably can guess where I am going with this story—the box would suffocate the contents.

The gem in the box was Jesus and the box was the church.

I also think that although we give lip service to the Bible and more specifically the Gospels we often do not heed the advice contained in Scripture. I do not think that the Bible is only a recitation of the relationship between God and the people of God but it is a roadmap for each of us.

When I was a young teenager, I thought that I would go into the church and while my parents did not push me in that direction, they did not try to make me take another road in life. This might have been surprising to those around my family as I was growing up. Although my parents were accomplished: my father was the first in his family to graduate from college and was a Wall Street investment banker and my mother was an

actress in England who left her family and country to become a wife and then a mother in the United States at a time when it seemed like Europe would enter yet another World War.

Any influence that my father had on me ended with his death when I was fifteen. My older siblings both left the home within a year of his death with one getting married and another going to college. My mother decided that we needed to downsize and move to a smaller house: why would two need to live in a seven bedroom house?

As I recall, I even made a visit to the Philadelphia Divinity School just before my father died. I was taken by my local priest also to see the bishop who gave me two pieces of advice as I recall: do not go to an Episcopal college and do not go right

from college to seminary. Instead I should get some real work and world experience.

Of course, I do not think that either of us thought that the work experience that I would get would be a tour of duty in Vietnam as an infantry company commander but it did. I think many might think that would be a speed bump which maybe it was.

After I came back from Vietnam, I had some reservations about continuing on my path to seminary. I thought I might have been too damaged to even qualify for seminary or ordination but I did finally give in to my earlier feelings.

When I went to my first assignment I had been ordained to the diaconate and a month before my

scheduled ordination to the priesthood my mother died from cancer.

I was now an orphan. That status was a difficult one for me to face considering other issues in my life which included my Vietnam experience. I did not know who I was--I did not know who I was becoming.

I spent many years trying to find some stability in my new life. And in those years there were many obstacles and failings but I always seemed to ask God to get me through the tough times and He did.

My story is not that important in the scheme of things. I only tell it because I believe life is always going to have roadblocks for us but we

have an advocate with the Father, the Holy Spirit who can comfort and help us move on.

All of this is an individual and personal journey but there is another journey which is even more important and that is the journey of the church. Jesus has directed that we live a life of love and giving. We must do that as a community. Yes, it is important that we share in worship but the real ministry for all of us is outside of the walls of this or any church. It is important that we feed off of one another in fellowship but we must extend that fellowship outside of the church.

The disciples came together to receive the power of the Holy Spirit. They were then to go and spread the good news to all the nations of the world. The Father was not abandoning the chosen people, the Jews, but was calling for more

inclusiveness. The Holy Spirit came at Pentecost as it never had come before. In the past, She came upon individuals, inspiring prophets and priests. She was given to all who placed their trust in Jesus, allowing us all to share God's message to the world.

We cannot grow the church without Her. It is not an institution created by man. Man did not establish this organization called the church. God did. In fact, it is more an organism rather than an organization. It can only grow if it has life—the new life in Christ. Today, we are all called the church because our lives have been transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. So in the end we individually and collectively are the church and not stone and glass around us.

The Church should never be the most popular institution in the world, because the Church goes counter to popular culture.

Let us open the box and let the gem see the light of day and show us the way to love this broken world so in need our love. Amen.