

Ecclesiology of the Living God

My friend John Cleghorn has recently published a book about how a dying church came back to life a few years ago. It is a remarkable story about a church resurrection that started under my late friend Charlie MacDonald and has continued to this day under John's leadership.

Their church had already decided to close its doors permanently when a couple asked if they could join the church before it closed. It was important to them to join *this* particular congregation – in the early 2000's – because as a gay couple they had found a welcome there, and that was unusual then, in that city.

Others asked to join as word got out they were scheduled to close in two weeks.

They didn't close.

Friends of ours joined the same day.

They had been devout Catholics, but due to divorces in their past, had sought a church that would recognize their union.

"That's quite a jump from Catholic to Presbyterian", I said.

She replied, "I couldn't take the guilt anymore, that Catholic guilt."

At this point, I was thoroughly intrigued, because I've always we Presbyterians cornered the market on guilt.

She continued, "We read about this church in the paper, and thought we ought to give it a try because we like an underdog. We drove over on Sunday morning, and we sat in the car, going back and forth, 'Should we go in? Should we not go in?'"

At this point her husband interjected, and I'll clean up what he actually said just a touch, "**Whatever**, we're going to church."

"Now I won't miss church," she said, "And I have to tell you, for years, I was the person who showed up with six trays of lasagna for the homeless ministry in my church, and I made it from scratch for them, a labor of love, even though I wouldn't personally be the one to serve it, and I don't want to be selfish, but where I am now, I just need the church to minister to me."

To read the story of Pentecost in Acts is to think about what it means to be *church*.

Now, perhaps more than ever, we need to consider what it means to be *church*.

We need to analyze our ecclesiology so our ecclesiology says something about God.

Pentecost tells the ongoing story of how God continues to call a covenant community into being to demonstrate to the world *who* God is.

That is why God called Israel; that is why God calls us now: To be God's people so that people will see who God is. At Pentecost, the scope of God's chosen people is expanded dramatically to include *all* the followers of God who have received the Holy Spirit. The gathered people were shown dramatically that God is still creating, still calling, still making covenants with God's people when the wind, the holy Ruach of God present in creation, is manifested again as the living God, ever the creator, creates the church.

I had so hoped we might be back together today, because Pentecost is the defining moment for the church, but we will be back together soon enough. And while we are preparing to return, perhaps we can ponder anew what the almighty can do, because unlike the J&J vaccine, Pentecost isn't "One and done."

God is always recreating the church.

We can't say once and for all what God is doing because God is always doing a new thing.

Just ask the congregation who thought that God would be done with them in two weeks.

Ask my friends who are learning that the church can care for them for a while.

Ask anyone who has ever expected the church to be solidly, reliably *one* way, found that it wasn't, or couldn't be, and by failing to meet our expectations, witnessed to the living God in some surprising *new* way.

Pentecost makes a mess of expectations.

God will be God however God chooses, so too many fixed notions of God won't serve us very well. A fixed God would lead us to a fixed ecclesiology, but a living God will lead us to a living understanding of church, and therein lies the challenge of the Pentecost text for us this day: Can we embrace a *living* ecclesiology?

Can we live into the full messiness of a church that proclaims the God whose Holy Spirit pours out on all people, who gives visions and prophecies and portents?

Can we appreciate what it means to worship *that* God?

Since God gets to be God how God wants to be God, we better pay attention to how God does it!

That means living into the messiness of what God made us to be.

We are created in the image of a triune God who chooses to self-define in loving community.

Living that way means that Christians value others as much as ourselves.

It means participating in each other's lives of faith – in all our particularity - because we know we are bound together in love, even across physical distance and time.

If the church embraces a *living* God, there's a very good chance we'll experience the messiness of Pentecost over and over again because a living God never stops working on us and preparing us to show the world who God is. The living God chooses to be God as a living, loving community, and calls us to show the world a living, loving community.

And just as we seek to show others who God is, we are shown who God is.

My friend Richard Cromie, now deceased, told a story about a little boy raised in a Christian family who went home one day after school and informed his mother that he wanted to be Jew. The young man's parents were active in their local church, taking him weekly to Sunday School and Worship. So, Dr. Cromie said, they were surprised, to put it mildly. With boy's permission they decided to consult with the grandparents, which of course, is where Dr. Cromie came in. The grandparents immediately began to ask questions of the boy: "Why would you want to give up Jesus?" "Oh, I don't want to give up Jesus," the boy answered.

"You would have to give up Christmas and Easter?" they added.

"Oh, I don't want to give up Easter and Christmas," he countered.

On and on it went, question, answer, point, counterpoint, until finally, the boy's grandfather asked "Why do you want to be a Jew?"

(Dr. Cromie interjected at this point that the best way to elicit good communication from someone who is doing something unexpected is not to go on the offensive with objections and arguments to persuade the other person, particularly when that person is a child, but rather, to ask *why?*)

"Why do you want to be a Jew?"

The boy's voice grew softer, he said. "Well, you see, I have a friend named David. He is the only Jew in our whole class. I just thought it would be nice if he had me as a friend, so the two of us could be Jewish together. And then if anyone ever wanted to pick on a Jewish boy, if they told him that he and his family were wrong and that he had to switch to being a Christian to get to heaven, then, then there would be two of us."¹

That's an ecclesiology of the Living God!

That's an understanding of life that gets that the church's whole reason to be is as an extension of God's love for us. That's an ecclesiology that reflects a living God that defines God's self in love and mutuality.

That's an understanding of God that grasps that as God is with us, so we are with others.

¹ Cromie, Richard. Paraphrased and quoted from *The Final Test of Faith*.

At Pentecost, God did a new thing. Actually, God did a really old thing, the same old/new thing that God has been up to since creation: breathing life into us in a new way, and if we believe God is alive, and we believe we live in God's eternal care, well, we can live knowing that the God who is alive and invites us to new life, the God who invites us to sit at table with the risen Christ, that God, that living God, can be *trusted* to keep doing what God has *always* done.

So how is God doing that today?

Among other ways, I see it at a called Session meeting, where our elders spent an hour and half in making a plan to include *everyone* in the life of the church when we come back, whether they can be physically here or not.

I see it in meals and groceries dropped off for those for whom the risk of going to the store was too great.

I see it in the leaders we ordain and install today.

And I see it in the ways we have sought creatively to live our calling to be church even as we have been distanced.

But that's just how *I* see it.

How do you see the living, loving God creating and recreating church, making all things new?

But maybe the better question is this: When you see the Spirit, what are you going to do?

Whatever it is, let's do it together, starting right here at this table.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.