

A FORGOTTEN DAY

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

May 28, 2023

Texts: Numbers 11:16-17, 24-30 and Acts 2:1-21

A little over two weeks ago I was at dinner in London with a gentleman who works with insurance and reinsurance through Lloyd's of London. He told me that he serves on the board of an organization that works to preserve historic churches in rural areas and small towns across southern England; for the most part the churches are vacant as there are no longer viable worshipping congregations. His organization tries to preserve the buildings for history's sake, but also in the hopes that one day there may be congregations that may call those old churches home. The buildings are historic, but the congregations are nowhere to be found.

The following day we joined Emma Diduch for some sightseeing in London. We stopped in St. Martin-in-the-Fields, a beautiful church just off Trafalgar Square. There has been a church at that site since at least the 13th century, but the current building was constructed ONLY 300 years ago! It is beautiful sacred space with clear glass windows, and was made even more beautiful that day by the voices of a choir that was rehearsing. The Church of England congregation that worships there is actively involved in ministries with poor and homeless folks in their neighborhood. They have purchased a separate building near the church to provide food and shelter for those in need, and have an annual campaign with the BBC to raise funds to support ministries among the homeless. The building may be historic, but the church at St. Martin-in-the-Fields is thoroughly modern!

A few days later Karen and I worshiped in Dornoch Cathedral in the far north of Scotland. The first worship service in that cathedral was held in 1239; there is an active congregation that worships weekly in that beautiful space amid soaring stone columns and beautiful stained-glass windows. We sang familiar hymns (which isn't always the case when we worship there) and the pastor's message included videos of mission work of the Church of Scotland in Malawi. The service was livestreamed, and they had adaptive technology for those with Bluetooth hearing aids. The building was historic, but the church at Dornoch Cathedral is thoroughly modern.

Last Sunday Karen and I worshiped in Dunkeld Cathedral in the little town of Dunkeld along the Tay River about an hour from Edinburgh. Construction of the cathedral began in 1260 and was completed in 1561, long before most of you were born. While portions of the cathedral are in ruins today, weekly worship continues in the nave which has beautiful stained-glass windows set among towering stone arches. One of those windows depicts St. Columba who is said to have brought Christianity to the British Isles centuries before the cathedral's construction; last Sunday the pastor of the church referenced that window as part of his morning message emphasizing the work of one individual to spread the gospel in an enduring way. As Chris does here from time to time, the organist had to shuttle between the organ in the choir loft in the back and a keyboard in the front of the cathedral in order to accompany the variety of hymns we sang. A zipline for her would be much longer and higher than that proposed to help Chris get back and forth between the organ and piano here! Among the worshipers were about a dozen folks with significant special needs who are intentionally welcomed each week as an outreach of the congregation. Following the service coffee, tea, and biscuits (cookies) were offered in a building just down an incredibly narrow street from the church – a time of fellowship that the special needs folks in particular really look forward to! The building was historic, but the church at Dunkeld Cathedral is thoroughly modern!

England and Scotland have a lot of historic churches that make our old American churches seem like babes in the woods. But I do wonder – is it a church if there is no community of believers that gather to worship and serve together there anymore? As the children's song reminds us, "the church is not a building... the church is the people;" there are no people in some of those old steepled buildings! Yet in other buildings – like St. Martin-in-the-Fields and Dornoch Cathedral and Dunkeld Cathedral – there are communities of Christ – churches – that are engaged in God's work in new ways in old spaces. They have continued to worship and serve in those places across hundreds of years, through centuries of storms and two world wars, and despite occasional schisms in the parent churches. At one time, the cathedrals were Roman Catholic churches in which bishops served; when the Reformation came to Scotland, the cathedrals became home to congregations of the Church of Scotland. The buildings are historic, but the churches are thoroughly modern!

Today is Pentecost, a day when we recall the Spirit coming upon those disciples hiding out behind closed doors in that upper room in Jerusalem. It is the day that the Spirit gave birth to the church, and yet there was no historic building large or small that marked that church. There was only a handful of disciples who had followed Jesus, seen him crucified, met him risen, watched him ascend to heaven, and then huddled together to wonder: *What next? What next* for them was the coming of the Spirit – that uncontrollable Spirit of God that swept into the room where they were gathered and pushed them out into the street with the good news of Jesus’ resurrection on their lips in a multitude of languages. The birth of the church did not begin with the laying of a block of stone or repurposing of a neighborhood building. It began with people – disciples of Jesus swept up and out by the Spirit to do what they could not do alone, what they could not imagine doing at all – not building buildings, but building Christ’s church by sharing the good news of the Gospel.

One might think that given the growth of the church all around the world, this day would be a red-letter day on all our calendars – like July 4th or Christmas or our birthdays. Yet, this day is oft forgotten, especially so this Memorial Day weekend. I suspect there are few folks in or out of the church who looked forward to today as Pentecost and many more who are celebrating this Memorial Day weekend as marking the beginning of summer. Pentecost is not alone in being forgotten, for I suspect that the race to summer has fewer and fewer folks recalling this weekend as a time to honor those war veterans who gave their lives in service to the nation. Friday’s paper had a host of activities around town for this Memorial Day weekend – art festivals and concerts, the opening of the city pools, exhibitions at the Frontier Culture Museum, dining options – but the only reference to veterans was the offering of free admission to “veterans and active service members” to the Woodrow Wilson Library and Museum. In our haste to look ahead to the joys of summer, we have stopped looking back with gratitude to those who served to make us free to enjoy the summer.

Let me suggest then that you take time tomorrow in some fashion to remember those who served – be it through a prayer, a commemoration, or a moment of silence. In the Breezeway are a collection of CDs of Covenant World War II veterans telling the stories of their service, and they are stories worth hearing. Tomorrow is not a day to glorify war or the instruments of war, it is not a day to wave the flag and pay homage to the nation; it is a day to honor the

sacrifice of those who laid down their lives for their neighbors. It is a day to pray for peace for our nation and world that are too often fractured by war and violence. Pray for peace that is just, peace that endures, peace that is faithful to God's call to let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. It is that kind of peace that the prophets and Jesus call us to pursue, to live into, and to teach to our children and our children's children.

That is my suggestion for tomorrow. Today, take time to celebrate Pentecost as joyfully as you celebrate the beginning of summer! Celebrate the birth of

a church that has endured for 2,000 years,
a church that began with a handful of disciples half a world away,
a church that is flawed and fractured but still striving to be faithful,
a church that is not a steepled building but a family – brothers and sisters
called to live and serve and worship together in love,
a church formed by the Spirit 2,000 years ago
and led by that same Spirit today.

Who knows where the Spirit will lead us! We do not control the Spirit. We are led by the Spirit, and like those disciples in Jerusalem that first Pentecost we do not know what we will be called to say or do in the days or years ahead. But we do know this – the Spirit of God will be with us to guide us, to prod us, to push us and to move us out of our comfort zones behind the walls of this semi-historic building into the highways and byways of this community and beyond in order to carry out thoroughly modern ministries that bear witness to God's love for the world and the hope we hold as the church of Jesus Christ in this 21st century!

In her book *Christianity After Religion*, Diana Butler Bass writes: "*The disconcerting reality is that many people in Western society see churches more as museums of religion than sacred stages that dramatize the movement of God's spirit.*"¹ Pentecost is not about the beginning of a movement to build museums of religion; it is about the coming of the Spirit to inspire disciples of Jesus to move out from their safe space into the city to tell the good news of the risen Christ to the world. We did not build this sacred space as a museum! We built it as a staging area for the continuing work of God's Spirit to welcome those in need, to share with our community, to house a preschool that ministers to young children, and to inspire us in worship to go out to serve! That is the story of this Covenant church! That is the story of Pentecost! That is our story – and we are sticking to it! Amen

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, HarperOne, 2012, p.258