

Pentecost Sunday
May 23, 2010
The Rev. Emily Richards

A Graduation Ceremony

This is the season for graduations. Throughout this month and the next many of us will be celebrating such occasions. I have participated in every kind of graduation ceremony possible. There was one ceremony, however, in which I experienced this rite of passage in a very different way. Invited to return to my alma mater, I gave the commencement speech to fifty 8th graders who were leaving the only school many of them had ever known. This had been the same school I had attended from pre-school through junior high. I was honored by the invitation and intrigued by the challenge.

And it was certainly a challenge. Unlike some other commencement speakers I was not nervous about public speaking. After all I do this every Sunday. However, this was not a sermon. I didn't have a text to guide me in my words and I had to speak to a very diverse group of young people and their families from all different faith traditions. Challenge number one. Challenge number two: What could I possibly say to a group of 13 and 14 year olds that they would ever remember? At my own graduation from this school I recall that a stuffy, old guy in a suit (probably the age I am

now) had given the address. What he said to me and my fellow classmates that day I honestly couldn't tell you -not one word.

So here I was a preacher lady in a collar twenty years after my own graduation from this institution standing up in front of a group of excited and apprehensive teens about to embark on a new journey. I chose to be honest with them. I told them that they would most likely never remember a word I said. But that was OK. It wasn't my words that they needed to remember. Rather, I told them that it was the experience of being a part of this community that they should never forget. It was the courage and confidence instilled in each of them by their teachers that had prepared them for this rite of passage and would serve them well in their future endeavors.

My words I hoped would be the final nudge, the final push out of the nest, so that they could step out into the world and take hold of their future believing in themselves as this community had always believed in them. Looking back on that speech, I realize that without quoting one word of Scripture I had, in fact, preached a Pentecost sermon to these young graduates. We refer to this Sunday, the Feast of Pentecost, as the birthday of the Church. As God's Spirit hovered over the waters and the earth came into being, so too God's Spirit hovers over those first disciples of Jesus and

the Church comes into being. Just as these men and women are experiencing a kind of birth in this moment, I think they are also experiencing a kind of graduation, as well. They had completed their studies with their teacher and following his instructions were now all gathered together again coincidentally in an upper room that is locked. They are waiting...waiting to see what is going to happen next. I imagine they are excited and anxious, a little fearful even. They've all worked hard to get to this moment and now it's time to be sent out into the world.

How it happens, however, no one could have foreseen. In one of the most dramatic stories in all of Scripture, these once timid and clueless disciples are filled with the awesome power of the Holy Spirit. They are not simply sent out, but pushed out through the force of a wild wind and a burning fire. Unbolting the locked doors, they burst through them into the world to do the most amazing things they never believed possible.

For Luke, the story of the Good News is told in two acts: the first act shared through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the second shared through the spirit-filled apostles who boldly step out into the world as God's agents of transformation. We call graduation a "commencement" rather than a "conclusion" because as much as it is an ending, it is also the beginning of something new. On the day of Pentecost, Act One came to its conclusion

and Act Two commenced. Emboldened by the Spirit those first followers of Jesus were able to believe in themselves and a future that only weeks earlier had seemed unimaginable in the shadow of the cross.

At another graduation ceremony, this one at my Alma Mater, The School of Theology at the University of the South (otherwise known as Sewanee), Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave the commencement sermon. Here are some of his words to the graduating seminarians: *“God is prepared to jeopardize the success of the God-project on earth rather than dispense with our collaboration. The God who created all, sustains all, ever after waits for us to be collaborators, God’s partners. When someone is hungry, God wants to feed that person, but does not cause hamburgers and pizzas to float down from the heaven,”* Tutu said. *“No, it’s because you and I and all of us say, ‘Yes, God, we want to be your partners.’ Help me, God is saying. Help me to change this world to have more imagination, more gentleness, more caring, more goodness, more laughter... So one day my children will wake up and know they believe in one family, and that they are all my family.”*

Pentecost is not something that just happened long ago to those men and women locked in that upper room in Jerusalem. Pentecost happens among us here today. Act Two of Luke’s story of the Good News continues with

us. God wants all of us to be collaborators and partners in God's holy endeavor. God says to you and me, "Help me. Help me transform this world so that all my children may know they are part of my family." God breathes in us God's Spirit and we burst through our own bolted doors out into the world to become God's agents of transformation in our own day. God instills in us the confidence and the courage we need to believe in ourselves and in a future where we are all one family, God's family.

In just a few moments Thomas, Oak and Sean will be welcomed into God's family through the waters of baptism. The Holy Spirit will hover over these waters and fill these three precious children with God's love and purpose. And yes, we have the audacity to believe that these three baby boys will one day help God change this world so that all God's children may believe they are part of one family. Every time we participate in the sacrament of baptism we are reaffirming our desire and our promise to God that we, in fact, do want to be God's partners in God's holy work.

So, today is both a birthday party and a graduation ceremony. We celebrate what took place in that upper room and in the streets of Jerusalem. We celebrate that the Spirit-filled power and purpose of the Church is birthed in us and in our witness. Today is also the beginning of

something new for us, as it is for these three precious children who are about to be baptized. With courage and confidence we step out into the world embracing God's call to us to be God's partners, believing in ourselves and our future as God believes in us.