

The Message for Sunday, May 23, 2010

Title: “The Second Most Important Birthday in the World”

Scripture: Acts 2:37-42

I. An important birthday... Did you ever wonder how birthdays got to be so popular? Birthdays were first celebrated in ancient Egypt. Later in ancient Greece, the birthday cake with candles was introduced. (http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/108355/why_our_birthdays_are_important.html)

After a brief foray into the world of cyberspace, I have found that the most important birthday varies from culture to culture. In Korea, the first birthday is the most important. On that occasion, the child is placed in the center of a number of objects. Whatever the child grabs will predict what his or her future will be like. (http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/108355/why_our_birthdays_are_important.html) The most important birthday in China is the 60th. Oscar Wilde once said that the 35th birthday must be the most important, because “London is full of women who have of their own free choice remained 35 for years!” (<http://www.dgreetings.com/birthday/30th-birthday-party.html>) Here in America, some believe that the most important birthday for music lovers is January 8. That is Elvis’ birthday. (<http://ginavivinetto.wordpress.com/2009/01/08/the-most-important-birthday-in-the-world-for-music-lover/>)

Strangely absent among birthdays Americans think are most important are those of Thomas Edison or Nicola Tesla; or the birthdays of George Washington or Franklin Delano Roosevelt. I would not have been surprised if someone might have mentioned Harlan Sanders or Henry Ford. But, most of the information I surveyed indicated that the most important birthday in America involves our own 18th or 21st birthday.

And yet, I remember being most eager about the 16th. That used to be the magic age when a child was granted access to the family car. Today, it seems that the 16th birthday is the magical age when a child receives his or her own car. At any rate, it still remains one of my most important, because it was at age 16 that I gained a certain adult-like freedom that has not yet been equaled.

II. The second-most important... That there is a huge public opinion declaring a particular age as the most important birthday in one’s life says a lot. It says that we are more interested in ourselves than in what might have happened for the good of the world. However, when I typed “the most *significant* birth” into my search engine I got a surprise. Site after site kept coming up defining the most significant birth in the history of the world as being that of Jesus.

I must say that from my perspective, the birth of Jesus is the one event that has shaped the world more than any other. But, what of the second-most important birth in the history of the world?

In my world, that happened one morning in Jerusalem. It was in the year, 786 (A. U. C., which is Latin and stands for “*ab urbe condita*, or “from the founding of the city”), or 786 years after the founding of Rome, because “A. D.” had not yet been invented. (The calendar by which the years are calculated *anno domini*, or in the year of the Lord, was devised in Rome in 525 A. D. by a Roman abbot named Dionysius Exiguus.)

One Spring morning, in 33 A. D. by our reckoning, the followers of Jesus gathered in Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of Shavuot. Shavuot was held fifty days after Passover and was one of the three pilgrim festivals that required all who could to meet in Jerusalem.

At about 9:00 in the morning, there was the sound of a mighty wind rushing. All of a sudden, it appeared as though there were flames of fire among those gathered, with what has been described as a “tongue of fire” resting on each of them—probably their heads. Then, each of them began to speak in one of the languages of all of the Jews who had found themselves living in Jerusalem.

Scholars now believe that this took place in the Temple Court. Further, scholars also believe that this happened not just to the original eleven Disciples, plus the newly elected Matthias, but to the entire group of 120 persons who made up the body of believers, mentioned earlier in Acts.

Since Scripture does not say exactly where they were or how many there were, this makes more sense because 120 persons can make a much larger commotion than 12; and, there are more than twelve nationalities mentioned as having heard their own language.

Many were amazed that morning in Jerusalem; and yet, as with any crowd, there were cynics. The cynics sneered and said, “They are filled with new wine.”

But Peter, standing distinctly with the other eleven Disciples, raised his voice and said, “Listen to what I say. It is only 9:00 in the morning,” implying that it was too early in the day to be drunk. He then preached a sermon about Jesus being the Messiah—the same Jesus whom they had crucified.

Immediately, people were moved and asked what they must do.

Peter said to them, “Repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” He continued to testify with the result that about 3,000 persons were baptized and added to the number of followers of Jesus.

The occasion is clearly an event of the Holy Spirit. But, it is also the day when The Church was born.

III. Numbers are impressive, but... (1) It has been estimated that the Church, today, has over two billion members. (http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_many_Christians_are_there_worldwide)

In some Western countries, church membership has been declining; but there are bright spots. We here at 1st United Methodist are one of them. And, in some places in the East, church membership has been growing at an astronomical rate. For example, in 1960, there were about 5,000 Christians in China. Today, fifty years later, that number is somewhere near 100 million. ‘One hundred million Christians in China!

In Korea, there are numerous churches with memberships of over 10,000. The Yoido Full Gospel Church in Seoul, Korea, has about 800,000 members who meet in seven different services, translated into sixteen languages, *each Sunday*. They have a senior pastor, 171 associate pastors and 356 lay pastors. (http://wiki.answers.com/Q/How_

[many Christians are there worldwide](#) and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoido_Full_Gospel_Church)
And, the Church in Africa is growing by leaps and bounds.

Numbers are impressive. For example, at the end of the year, we will have averaged about 1,000 in worship each Sunday. Each year, we add about 100 new members, net, to the membership rolls. In spite of the economic slowdown, we will bring in, and disperse, nearly \$2 million. We will have about 700 in Sunday School each Sunday, and we will have about 400 children and about 100 adult volunteers in Vacation Bible School.

These are just a few of the “numbers” we will produce each year. But, sheer membership numbers do not tell the whole story—in Korea, in any other country in the world, or right here in Murfreesboro. While numbers speak loudly, we have to remember that Jesus is in the life-changing, soul-saving business. And, each number represents a soul touch by Jesus. Each number represents one more person saved for eternity. And, each number represents one more person whose life, not only in eternity but also on this side of eternity, has been saved from a life of trouble, pain, and misery.

That is the first thing I want to say. Each number represents a soul.

IV. God chose a partner... (2) The second thing I want to say is this. God could have chosen to touch people for Christ any way imaginable.

One of the ways Jesus touched people was through His miracles. In the 5th Chapter of the Gospel of Mark, we read about the healing of the demoniac of Gerasene (Mark 5:1ff). In the next chapter of the Gospel of Mark (Mark 6:53ff), we read where Jesus went back to the country of the demoniac a second time. This time, when he went back, he was recognized by the people who greeted him enthusiastically. The only possible explanation for their reception on this subsequent journey to the other side of the Sea of Galilee is that the healed demoniac went back to his people and told them about what Jesus had done for him.

Another way Jesus touches people is through personal interception. Any sinner who has met Jesus and has been transformed will say that Jesus changed his life. Jesus touches people who can be touched in no other way.

And yet, it is clear that from the very beginning that God chose to touch the multitudes through a gathering of believers. Of course, it was the work of the Holy Spirit; but it is impossible to deny that the work of the Holy Spirit on the body of believers was what brought attention to Christ on the day of Pentecost in Jerusalem. That was the model God chose for the conversion of society. Instead of just visiting each, individual person with the Holy Spirit, God chose to bless *the gathering* by touching them while they gathered; and they, in turn, blessed those with their ministry. God chose The Church as a partner with the Holy Spirit in making it possible to reach out to the culture.

I am a product of the ministry of the church. When I was very young, my father and mother often did not know how they were going to pay their grocery bill. But, the one thing they knew for sure was that on Sunday morning, we were going to be in church. Just as we never questioned the sun coming up each day, or the house payment coming due each month, we never questioned what we were going to do on a Sunday morning.

I often say that it was my parents who took me to church, but the ministry of the church kept me there, especially the youth group and the music. And, while I was there in their safekeeping, the church partnered with my parents and began to mold me into the person I am today. I want that to be said for every person, especially every young person, who steps in these doors.

That is the second thing I want to say: That God chose to touch people for Christ by partnering with The Church.

V. An imperfect partner... (3) The third thing I want to say is this. I once had a member (whose name shall remain anonymous) who had been in the hospital. It was in the day and age when the hospitals in Nashville used to call the churches and let them know that they had a member as a patient. Somehow, I did not get a call on this lady. She came home from the hospital, and I finally got a call from someone that she had been a patient.

I called her to schedule a home visit. When I went by her home, I explained that I was sorry she had not been visited, but that we just did not know.

She told me, "I just believe that if the pastor loved me, he would know when I was in the hospital."

That is an extreme example of how one person felt as though the ministry of the church sometimes fails its membership. Needless to say, we do sometimes mess up. We do not want to mess up, but we are God's imperfect partner.

Sometimes, when I read the news I get a little depressed. I think: "The Church must have failed that person." And then I think, "Why is there so much crime, hatred, bigotry and greed among the people of our community? Why hasn't The Church made a bigger impact?" And then, sometimes when I am really down, I think, "Here we are, offering the way and the truth and the life," as Jesus referred to Himself in John 14:6. "Why doesn't God send us the people who need to hear this message?"

But then, I realize that were it not for The Church, our civilization might be much worse. We can not imagine what an impact The Church has had until we realize just how much worse our community would be if we had not given our hearts to Christ.

VI. Annie and Helen... I am reminded of a little girl in my home town who was born into privilege. But, when she was about eighteen months old, she became blind and deaf. The family did not know how to cope with this situation, and so they pampered her to the point that she became an obnoxious and unruly, spoiled brat. When she was happy, she giggled with glee; and when she was dissatisfied, she kicked, screamed, and scratched. Finally when the little girl was about six, her family decided to hire a teacher from the Perkins School for the Blind. This teacher's name was Annie; and her sight was impaired.

One night, the little blind girl was exceptionally unruly at dinner. She went around to each person's plate at the table and simply grabbed a handful of whatever was there so that she could shove it in her mouth.

Frustrated, her teacher took her from the table and went out to the hand pump to draw water so that she could clean the food from her hands. While the water was

rushing over her little fingers, Annie began to spell out, “Water,” on the palm of the little girl’s hand. And then, something clicked.

Somehow, little Helen understood that what she was experiencing was being spelled for her. She miraculously uttered, “Water,” and began to beg for the words to everything in her little world. Of that experience Helen Keller said, “That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, joy, set it free!” (adapted from a number of sources, including, sermons@parishpublishing.org)

An imperfect teacher with a savage little six-year-old as her only student became a partner with God, and worked for the little girl’s transformation into one of the most remarkable women in the 20th Century.

Is this not what The Church is about: Imperfect as we are, partnering with God to transform one soul at a time?

No wonder we want to celebrate the birthday of The Church. ‘The second-most important birthday in the world. Amen. The Rev. Michael O’Bannon, Pastor