

## “Happy Birthday! And What Have You Learned In The Past Year?”

I. Introduction:

Today is a red letter day! Today is the Feast of Pentecost and the color is red. Today ends the fifty days of Easter, and today the Christian Church celebrates its birthday. On the very first Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit, also known as the Comforter and the Paraclete, came in a powerful way to fill the first group of 120 disciples with what some of our Christian brothers and sisters call “Holy Ghost Power.” The promise made by the resurrected Jesus to send the Holy Spirit had come true. Present in the rushing wind and in the tongues of fire, the Holy Spirit turned a diverse group of disciples from many different lands into the Body of Christ. And there and then the church that we love so much was born.

II. Birthdays. We in the Hess family have a custom about birthdays. When any one of us has a birthday celebration that person is asked both to share what he or she has learned in the past year and one thing he or she looks forward to in the coming year. The lessons we have learned have come in many different forms. Sometimes we’ve learned a lesson of gratitude, or endurance, or perhaps trust. Sometimes our lessons have been hard learned and at other times easy in the coming. But there have always been lessons and always a hope for the future year.

Now since today is the birthday of the whole church and since this year is the 50th birthday of the Church of the Ascension, let’s reflect upon what we have learned this year and what we hope for in the next. This has been an eventful year in the life of Ascension. There has been huge transition. Clergy have come and gone, vestry have come and gone, as have members in general. There’s been a good bit of uncertainty in our parish about exactly what was going to emerge out of all this transition. The future was hard to see. In fact, a year ago, no one could have predicted that today I would be standing here with you. I believe that during the last year God certainly knew what lay ahead for us even though we did not.

III. Herein lies what I see as our most important lesson of the year: The crucial importance of being free from fear. Change, particularly change that we haven't initiated, often provokes anxiety. The typical questions raised during a period of change are: "Can we survive this change?" and "If we do manage to get through this, what kind of a life will we have?" Perhaps these were the kind of questions that the first generation of Christians were asking shortly after Jesus' crucifixion. We can see this in today's Gospel reading: "When it was evening, the first day of the week . . . the doors of the house were locked for fear of the Jews." The disciples were deeply afraid. At first it must have seemed to them that the Kingdom of love that Jesus had taught them about had been shattered.

But it had not been shattered at all; it was in the process of being transformed. That is the way of it for us as a people of faith: Our lives are often changed but never shattered. Let's look at what happened next in the Gospel: "Jesus came and stood among them and said 'Peace be with you.' After that he showed them his hands and his feet and they rejoiced to see him." When they experienced the risen Christ their fear was transformed into joy. I believe the same thing has happened at Ascension. The fearfulness that some of us had about the future has turned into joy. This I believe is our number one lesson from the past year – as followers of Jesus Christ we do not need to be afraid. As we have been promised, fear is always, in God's time, being transformed into joy. I believe this happens because God is working on our behalf often long before we know it. At times this is most clear to us in retrospect.

IV. Gratitude. Lesson two also comes out of what we have experienced this past year. This is the lesson of gratitude. God has blessed us richly. We're grateful for the lay leadership that emerged in the Search Committee and the Vestry; we're grateful for the ministry of Father Cooke; we're grateful for the guidance of our Diocese; and we're grateful for the faithfulness of the staff of Ascension. This congregation this morning is evidence of God's blessing. The five persons being baptized today and the persons being confirmed next Sun day are also evidence of God's blessing. But we have to be careful about our blessings. It's truly a temptation to begin to believe that we are being blessed because of who we are. We can even begin to presume that we are manufacturing our own blessings. Nothing could be further from the truth. God blesses us often through one another. We are being blessed because God loves us. Our response to the wonderful blessings that God has given us at Ascension should therefore be one of gratitude. I hope that we are able to keep a sharp focus upon how much God has blessed us. And I also hope that our gratitude to God is overflowing in our prayers. This week several of our parishioners shared a quotation about gratitude with me. I'd like to share this with you.

“Gratitude makes sense of the past,  
Gratitude brings peace for today, and  
Gratitude creates a vision for tomorrow.”

- V. Conclusion. Vision for tomorrow. This takes me to my final birthday reflection. This reflection is about our future. What will we be reflecting about having learned next year on our 51st birthday? First let me say this: I’m downright optimistic about our future. I’m reminded in my optimism of what one of Ascension’s former rectors, The Reverend Larry Gipson, said to us in last week’s sermon: “Ascension can do whatever it sets its mind to do.” I believe he is absolutely correct. What I hope we will be reflecting upon next year will be our adventures in shared ministry. I hope that in the next year we’ll come to increasingly understand what Christ wants us to do, increasingly know what our spiritual gifts are, and increasingly will have tried to connect these gifts to the world around us. I hope that next year we will be reflecting upon how alive our ministries have become and how exciting it has been to more fully open the doors of Ascension to let the Holy Spirit blow in and let the Holy Spirit blow us out into ministry. And now as the persons to be baptized, their families, and their sponsors come forward to join me, in the spirit of this day let us sing the first two verses of hymn 528 “Lord you give the great commission.” Please give close attention to the words as we sing.