

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF DENTON  
REV. JOHN BURTON  
JUNE 12, 2011

SERMON: A GRADUATION PARTY  
TEXT: ACTS 2: 1-4

**When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.**

Graduating is a very important business, especially for proud parents. Justin Wilson once told the story about a proud pa-pa in a rural town in south Louisiana. His daughter graduated from high school and, with her pa-pa's approval, when to attend a foreign school, TC and U. While she was away the man's friends said many things, like, "Why yo daughter go way off der when der is one fine school rat chere at LS and U?" He reply, "She go off to get de bes ed-u-casion possible." When the daughter come home pa-pa is very proud and throw a big party. In the middle of the party he gets his daughter up in front of the peoples and tells her, "Say something smart. Say something ed-u-cated." She look at him! He say again, "Say something smart so people know you get a good education over there." She look at him long and hard and finally she she sorta snort and say "Pi R<sup>2</sup>." He pa-pa look at her. People start to laugh. His mouth it drop open and hang der for a while. Finally pa-pa say, "Girl, what nonsense they teach over der? Everyone know pie R round and cornbread R square!"

On a very simple level graduation is a moving from one state, condition, or program into another, and sometimes the changes can be jarring.

Today we are honoring our graduates. Lauren Featherstone and Trenton McNary have graduated from high school. Christine Burkett, Kelly McGill, and Amanda Dill have graduated from college. They are leaving schools where they succeeded and are now embarking on a new chapter in their lives, filled, we hope, with challenges, opportunities, wisdom, compassion, and faith. Our thoughts and prayers go with them.

There are other types of graduations though.

The Jews have rituals for when a boy becomes a man and a girl becomes a woman.

People get married

People get J.O.B.s'

People have children

The last child leaves the nest

People become grandparents

People retire

People become community volunteers

Think of all of those graduating events! So much to celebrate! Isn't it wonderful that life is so full of opportunities for change and growth! Wouldn't it be boring otherwise!

Not all people graduate, though.

Some people get stuck. Sometimes it may be their fault. Sometimes not. Maybe they are just happy where they are? Maybe they are afraid to take a big step that would change their lives? Maybe they are afraid of failing? You know, it takes courage to graduate into a new world with new rules and new measures for success.

I remember leaving Vanderbilt after seven years of higher education and thinking, "Great, I finally get to the point I can smile while writing 50 page papers and from here on ought they'll grade me on teaching a JR High Sunday School Class!"

Let's change gears, shall we. Let's think of Jesus' disciples.

They were, for the most part, very common folk. Nothing they had ever done had prepared them for what Jesus was going to ask them to do. Peter and his friends had just caught the largest catch of fish ever. Then they walked off of their boats like walking across a big stage in front of adoring family, and accepted Jesus call to be fishers of men (and women!) Something totally new. The same old hooks, nets, and bait wouldn't work - they would have to learn a whole new way of fishing!

For three years they learned under Jesus' direction.

For three years they did their best to walk in the footsteps of the Master.

For three years they soaked up Jesus like a sponge.

And then, at the height of his minister, he was brutally executed.

Class dismissed! Some of his former students huddled in a secret upper room. Some made a run for it, heading down the Road to Emmaus.

When Jesus rose up from that tomb it, well, it blew their minds!

After that for a little while it got back almost to normal. Jesus was with them. He talked to them. One day he even cooked breakfast. But when he ascended into Heaven they felt acutely alone in a big, hostile world.

They tried to keep going as they had but without Jesus they did not grow and some of the fringe members began to fall away. The situation was not tenable.

And then came Pentecost - and the whole game changed again.

Some call Pentecost the birthday of the Church.

Before Pentecost there was a community of believers but there was NOT a church - a structure founded on the Word and Grace of God in Jesus and fired up by the constant presence of the Holy Spirit.

They did not walk across a stage, shake anybody's hand, and get a diploma but the day the Holy Spirit came was graduation day all over again for the disciples and all the other followers of Jesus!

Jesus called them to be more than the people who stood around Jesus and cheered when he preached or performed a miracle or make the Pharisees look bad.

Jesus called them to be "the church", to be the people who follow Jesus without having to touch Jesus, to see Jesus, to speak with Jesus. To be the people who would take the Word of God out into the whole world for all people!

The disciples graduated and...I think history makes it clear that they were up to the new challenges put before them.

But being a Christian, being a part of the Church, is not one long unchanging slog. It's not as one of my good bicycling friends once said about bicycling through Iowa, "The scenery never changes - corn fields and bean fields, bean fields and corn fields."

Once we are baptized our faith is not like riding across Iowa - nothing changes!

The great Theologian and Psychologist James Fowler wrote "Stages of Faith" in which he talks about six broad stages of faith.

I'm not going to talk about them here - too technical. Maybe I'll get them on the web site. But what I want you to think about is that there are six stages of faith development.

I picture this as something like a staircase of faith that leads onward from baptism.

If just merely believing in Jesus is enough to get into heaven then why go any further?

Well, if your goal is merely to love Jesus enough to get into heaven then maybe there is no reason.

But gosh wouldn't you hate to get married to someone who loved you just enough to have children?

But if you actually love God with all your heart and mind...is just enough...enough for you?

If you love math - will you be content taking a course in long division every year, over and over again?

If you love justice - will you be content to be shocked and outraged at the same injustices every day, every, week, every year?

If you love your country - will you be content to let everyone else vote on who leads our country while you sit home and grip at the news - again and again and again?

And if you love God – will you be content with an static faith that never grows when deeper and more meaningful levels of faith are available for those who all willing to graduate into them.

Are you satisfied? Or do you want something more?