

## New Church, New World

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

Pentecost  
June 4, 2017

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” – John 20:21

Today is Pentecost, traditionally regarded as the birthday of the Christian church. That church was born, we believe, because God sent Jesus into the world and Jesus, in turn, sent his followers into the world, as today’s text from the Gospel of John attests.

Today is also the day when we will baptize Charlotte Lynn Lumley into the faith and family of the Christian church, and through that rite of water and the word, she will receive a second birthday because baptism gives her a new identity. Formerly the toddler of Rachel and Kurt, grandchild of Sherri, Dave, Bill, and Kay, after her baptism Charlotte will also be a member of the Christian church. Not a half-member because of her tender years, but a full member, with all the rights and privileges pertaining thereto. There is one door into the Christian church, and it is baptism, and Charlotte, with our help, is soon to step through it.

What will be waiting for her on the other side? That’s largely up to us, us being not just her immediate family and us being not just the spiritual family of Faith United Church of Christ. When we say “us” in the context of baptism, we are talking about a vast array on earth and in heaven, the living and the dead, those who live with us, those who lived before us, and those who will come after us. All who claim to be followers of the way of Jesus the Christ are the “us” who are waiting to welcome Charlotte into her new family, and on whose behalf we will shortly administer the Rite of Christian Initiation.

A few weeks ago, Jill Dugovics wasn’t in church because she was at her parents’ church in Akron to help celebrate the ninetieth birthday of her father, Howard. Jill was raised in the Congregational church in Akron, where her parents have been members for over sixty years, and the members there wanted to share in the celebration of one of their most faithful. On Howard’s behalf, we will baptize Charlotte.

A week ago yesterday, an overflow crowd of two congregations said good-bye to Merle Sundheimer at his funeral in Mayfield Heights. Merle and Sue Georges were members of the Solon Community Church, and they had been longtime members here at Faith. When Merle died, people from both congregations assembled to pay their respects and to show their affection for a couple who meant a great deal to many people. Merle has died, but we remain united with him in the bonds of Christian love, which unites us with the church in heaven and on earth, and therefore on his behalf we will baptize Charlotte.

And some of you may have watched the national spelling bee on Thursday night and noticed my friend, the Rev. Dr. Brian Siesema, sitting next to the pronouncer. Brian is an old friend of mine who got his Ph.D. in linguistics at MIT while I was working on my doctorate in theology a few blocks up the street. Brian’s job at the spelling bee is to confirm a word’s

etymology. When he's not at the bee, Brian is the priest at Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church in East Lansing, Michigan, and so on his behalf, and on behalf of his parishioners, we will baptize Charlotte.

You see, that's the way it works with Christian baptism, thanks to Pentecost. Christianity is a big tent. Of the world's roughly seven-and-a-half billion people, about 2.2 billion of us are Christian. That's a lot of Christians, and that's a lot of different ways of being Christian. How Charlotte will live out her Christian calling in the years to come no one knows today. We baptize her in faith as we baptize her into the faith.

And in doing so, we will not only provide Charlotte with a new identity, but we will be providing the Christian church with a new identity as well. The Christian church, in a little way because of a little girl, will be different after this service. It will have a member it didn't have before, and none of us knows now how that new member will help to shape her new spiritual home. And through the shaping of that future church, Charlotte may help to bring a new and better world to birth. We will be watering that seed, planted by the Holy Spirit, with the waters of baptism, and will praying for its growth and flourishing as Charlotte herself grows and flourishes.

There are many things in the Christian tradition that are historically uncertain, but one of the very few facts that both church and secular historians agree on is that the world was changed after the birth of the Christian church. There was a new world after the church was born on Pentecost, and in many respects, Christianity has made that world a better place. Churches, hospitals, orphanages, hospices, the end of slavery, the spread of literacy – the list goes on and on of the ways Christians have brought God's realm closer to the realms of this world.

How Charlotte Lynn Lumley will continue that work of reconciling love no one knows right now. Perhaps she'll help people find places to live, as her father has. Perhaps she'll help people heal as her mother has. Perhaps her grandparents will reveal possibilities to her that none of us imagines at the moment. As God sent Jesus, Jesus sends us and all, as we say, in God's time.

But from this day forward, Charlotte will never have to do that searching alone, and her family will never have to feel that they are the only people she can count on. The church is here – and in Cincinnati and in London and in Mumbai and in every other place life may take Charlotte – and it will be waiting to help her and to be helped by her. That's the promise of this day, and it began on Pentecost. Thanks be to God.