

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO US

Dr. John Allan Lavender

John 17:21 Our years' preaching schedule is about half done. Thus far, we've had series of sermons focusing on Advent, Christmas, Epiphany, Easter, and now Pentecost or Whitsuntide. While I was preparing for this sermon, I came across some interesting history relating to how Whitsuntide got its name. You remember that on the first Pentecost, some 3000 people acknowledged Jesus as their Savior and were baptized. Over the years, as the church grew, Pentecost became a favorite time for baptisms. The people who were baptized wore white symbolizing the cleansing of their sin through the blood of Jesus shed upon the cross. Over the years, Pentecost became known as White Sunday. Later, as the church became "liturgicalized", if I may coin a word, White Sunday evolved into Whitsuntide and it is by that name that Pentecost is known by our more

liturgical brothers and sisters. Several years ago, toward the end of the war, a sailor on leave in New York City stopped at a restaurant to celebrate his birthday. He was seated alone for most of the meal but when the waiter brought a cupcake with a single candle in it, everybody in the restaurant turned to look at him as he began to sing “Happy Birthday To Me, Happy Birthday To Me.” Naturally, he was deluged by people who wanted to help him celebrate and what started out to be a lonely evening turned into one filled with happiness and companionship. Something similar to that happened this week. When the subject of my sermon was announced, “Happy Birthday To Us,” several of the Chicago newspapers who receive the Morgan Park Advance each week called to find out what anniversary we were celebrating. They had been thinking about doing a series of feature articles about historical churches and thought ours would be a great one with which to kick off

this series. When they were told the sermon had to do with Pentecost, the birthday of the Christian church, they lost interest. Without exception, all of them felt the celebration of Pentecost was not important news. What a great mistake! Pentecost ranks with Easter and Christmas as the third great festival of the Christian year. But far too few of us know anything about it. We, like the media, are much more interested in a 50th anniversary of some small church on some insignificant corner than in the fact that nearly 2000 years ago, God gave the world His Holy Spirit and so charged the lives of early believers with power they were instrumental in spreading the gospel of His son throughout most of the known world in one generation. Yes, to far too many people, it just isn't important that two millennia ago the church of Jesus Christ was born and, as a result, we say to one another as members of the Body of Christ "Happy Birthday To Us!" So much has happened since that

eventful day when a handful of disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and the world mission of the church began. Next Sunday, we're going to talk about the vastness of the Christian Enterprise and seek to show the measure of its influence upon our lives when I preach on the theme "Big Oaks From Little Acorns Grow." But today, I want to talk a little bit about the church itself, this living organism comprised of all Christians whose birthday we celebrate this morning. The one word which characterized the Apostolic Church was power. Just a few weeks previous to Pentecost, the disciples had been a cowering, quivering band of the doubtful, despairing and defeated. Peter, who had vowed his allegiance to Jesus three times, had denied his Lord three times. John, who wanted to occupy the seat of honor at His right hand when the Kingdom was finally established, slept through the hours Jesus spent in Gethsemene. The rest of the disciples who had promised to make Christ

King had melted away and Jesus was left alone to die. Suddenly, all that changed. Fear and deception were replaced by faith and direction. The disciples knew where they wanted to go and that they had the power to get there. The church was born, a world mission was begun, and the end of it is not yet. We don't have time this morning to talk in great detail about the nature of the power of the Holy Spirit which the disciples received that day. To deal with it adequately would require a year of preaching. For the moment, let me outline just a few facets of that power. First of all, today marks the anniversary of the birth of -- **Power To Conquer The Differences Which Divide Us.** Before Pentecost, the disciples were more interested in their own personal peculiarities and position than in the greater cause of Christ's Kingdom. They were too busy vying for the place of prominence in His wee cabinet of twelve men to think about winning other. Pentecost changed all that. It was as if the

blindness were removed from their eyes and, instead of having their vision restricted to the narrow confines of their own desires, it was broadened to include the earth. A oneness was born at Pentecost which has never died. It is a spiritual oneness without organic oneness and it produces unity without uniformity. Oh, sometimes, even today, some of our prejudices show through and we castigate those who are different from us. W. A. Criswell, the man who followed Truett as pastor of the largest Baptist church in the world, has been quoted as saying: "A Negro will never be welcome in my church." How unfortunate. But you see, Dr. Criswell does not speak with a Christian church. When the signs of our spiritual immaturity show through, we need to remember that as God measures time, wherein a thousand years are as a day, we are still babes in Christ. We, meaning the church, are a couple of days old. We are still in the process of growth.

Centuries of misunderstanding and fear are not going to be bridged in a day, a year, or even a decade. It may be another two millennium before the church arrives at that blessed state about which Jesus prayed, when referring to all who would follow men: "That they may be one" (John 17:21ff) Today also marks the anniversary of the birth of --**Power To Conquer Difficulty And Danger.** I'm thrilled that on June 4th we are to have a delegation of Russian Baptists in our church. Slowly, but surely, the Iron Curtain is lifting and we are beginning to get a glimpse of what our brothers and sisters in Christ have been doing in that oppressive atmosphere. We've learned there are 5400 Baptist churches in the Soviet Union. At first it was thought there might be as many as 500,000 believers scattered throughout that great empire. Now we know, according to a recent copy of Mission Magazine, over 2,500,000 people are actually participating in the life of the Christian church in

Russia. The same thing is true in Korea. Kem Spencer, a dear friend of mine and a groomsman at our wedding, is serving as a Presbyterian missionary in that country. He reports that the fires of revival are burning in that land, especially in North Korea, and under the very shadow of the hammer and sickle, the church goes on in power. This morning, as we gather about the Lord's table, we need to express our gratitude to God for the incredible gift of His Son. But let's also thank Him for the gift His Holy Spirit. For through Him, we have power to overcome tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril. Power to overcome both the difficulties and the differences which divide.

"In Christ there is no East or West
In Him no North or South. But one
great fellowship of love
Throughout the whole wide earth."