***Things we miss when it’s our birthday***

A message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

Jesus was a Jew, not a Christian. The followers of Jesus, many of them, were practicing Jews, and, so we say Happy Belated *Sha-vuu – oat* to Jewish sisters and brothers. You see, Shavuot, or in English, the Festival of Weeks, was in ancient times, a chance for Jews from near and far to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, making a ritual offering of their first fruits from their crops at the Synagogue, praying for a continued good harvest.

Jews had been dispersed to far away, non-Jewish countries, emphasized in the Biblical story from Acts, “Jews from every nation”, being there for that chaotic moment, on the 50th Day after the Jewish passover – “Fifty Days” being the translation of the Greek word “Pentecost”. On this birthday of Christianity, I am reminded that Pentecost was born out of Judaism, not a replacement to it.

Let me talk about birthdays for a moment. Birthdays. Cakes with candles. Cards. Just for fun, I surfed the internet to find when birthdays began. At first, in Ancient Egypt, a birthday meant the birth of a god. A Pharaoh was crowned, when he or she became a God. Great information for kings, not so much for us.

Birthdays really became practiced first in the late 19th Century in the United States, Sweden, and Estonia. Historians note that birthdays became popular around the same time that clocks were beginning to be made, and people were able to reliably know the time. Watching the time apparently made people more aware of the passing of it, so they began to mark birthdays more.

Greeting cards began in the 20th century. Eye-rolling poems were in full swing, like this 1926 greeting:

“I know your age / But I’ll keep it mum /

If you’ll do the same / When my birthdays come.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Birthdays are strange, aren’t they? We nurture in our culture so much expectation around the day. Kids get excited, more often about the gifts they hope to receive than the significance of the day itself.

Birthday celebrations, of course, differ from culture to culture. Here is an old Germany birthday tradition, for men who were still single on their 30th birthday. (They were to) sweep the steps of city hall while dressed in drag until they could find a virgin to kiss… It’s been modernized (where, now) single men and women spend their 30th birthdays drinking cheap wine while sweeping steps or doing other chores to show they’re “eligible” for marriage.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Strange, right! I have been to a few kids’ birthday parties, and they get so excited at the local Indoor Play Centre, playing laser tag or gorging themselves at a restaurant. They are so pumped and sugar-infused that I don’t think they would notice Pentecost fire falling from the sky or people speaking in different languages. We get self-absorbed in birthdays; it’s built into our culture.

The temptation in these busy times, is to get so absorbed in what we are doing that we miss the wonder; we miss the bigger picture in life.

There is a Buddhist story that speaks to this challenge of being open to holy wonder, even at your birthday party. Once upon a time, as a man was walking through a forest, he saw a tiger peering out at him from the underbrush. As the man turned to run, he heard the tiger spring after him to give chase. Barely ahead of the tiger, running for his life, our hero came to the edge of a steep cliff. Clinging onto a strong vine, the man climbed over the cliff edge just as the tiger was about to pounce.

Hanging over the side of the cliff, with the hungry tiger pacing above him, the man looked down and was dismayed to see another tiger, stalking the ravine far below. Just then, a tiny mouse darted out from a crack in the cliff face above him and began to gnaw at the vine.

At that precise moment, the man noticed a patch of wild strawberries growing from a clump of earth near where he dangled. Reaching out, he plucked one. It was plump, and perfectly ripe; warmed by the sunshine. He popped the strawberry into his mouth. It was perfectly delicious. The end.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Are we courageous enough, in those times when we feel like we are just hanging by a thread with all that weighs us down, brave enough to notice the strawberry? Can we be mindful, even in our moments of elation and pain? To celebrate Pentecost – no there is no Spirit falling like Flames upon people and everyone speaking in different tongues. But we CAN be intentional today, to notice people around us, to notice that stories about God can be fun, and unpredictable. Can we also notice the needs of others beyond our celebrations, or our pain? Can we love our neighbours, every neighbour, no exceptions?

Maybe, too, we can take that intentionality about noticing things into tomorrow, as we awaken, to notice the sun, or the rain, and yes, to notice our aches and pain too. But before we get caught up in our day, let us pause for a few minutes, to let Wonder and Spirit to speak to us. Amen.

1. “The Strange Origins of American Birthday Celebrations.” Joe Pinsker, in *The Atlantic*, November 1, 2021. https://www.theatlantic.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “16 Birthday Traditions Around The World That Might Surprise You.” Dylan Lyons. https://www.babbel.com/en/magazine, July 21, 2018. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This ancient Zen Buddhist Story “The Tiger and the Strawberry” can be found easily online. I found this at https://medium.com/age-of-awareness/the-tiger-and-the-strawberry-b73de1dccf19 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)