Happy Birthday Church! Pentecost is the joyous feast when, each year,

1) we celebrate the sending of the Holy Spirit that 1st Pentecost.
2) We celebrate the Holy Spirit present in us and among us today.
3) We wrap up the Easter season.

And since the descent of the Holy Spirit led the apostles to move out from behind closed doors and to get out there and preach the Good News, leading people to become disciples, Pentecost is the birthday of the church.

That being said, I would like us to look at part of our second reading today in a different light. True, its 1st meaning deals with the issues St. Paul was addressing in Galatia. But in becoming scripture, St. Paul’s letters become timeless. So in the context of this feast of Pentecost, let’s look at part of that letter as a birthday card. Not so much the first list that Paul provides, all the things that hamper the Spirit, the things that can take root in us without the Holy Spirit.

For a minute let’s focus on the 2nd list, the fruit of the Spirit. Picture a birthday card, one of those serious ones, that mention all your good qualities. Here is how it reads: You, church are loving, joyful, peaceful, patient. I see kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Did you ever get a serious card like that, and wonder: Who are they talking about? I wish all that were true!

St. Paul watched people transformed by the Spirit in city after city, community after community. Folks he preached to had a fair number of those works of the flesh that he names in the first list when Paul first encountered them. But as they accepted Christ, were baptized, and started to live in a community with a mission, letting the Spirit shape them, they changed from one way of living to the other.

So how does the Spirit accomplish that transformation? As I read the New Testament, as I think about my own journey, and the journeys of people in each place I’ve served, I’ve noticed a couple of things. First, we are often shaped more by people than ideas. St. Paul’s message was important, but it was the force of his faith, the Spirit working in him, leading him to give so completely of himself that made people in Galatia sit up and take notice when he spoke or wrote to them.

And we aren’t just shaped by those who lead the way, like a St. Paul. We are shaped as well by the people we help along the way. Parents may raise their children, but children also raise their parents. Then beyond the walls of home, ask anyone who volunteers, who serves in a ministry, who reaches out to others. Thank them for all they do, and they will tell you: “I get so much more out of this than the people I serve.” Nothing wrong with that!

That brings me to a second observation. We’ve all been given gifts right from the beginning. But as an example, while the children being baptized today have the muscles needed to walk, no one starts walking on the day they were born. A baby develops a loving relationship with mom & dad. When the right time comes, the baby is on the floor. Mom or dad hold out their arms, and that child starts to walk to them. Unsteady at first, a step at a time, until they learn to run. But
before you know it, they are ready to leave home and start their own family. That all develops through human relationships.

God has given us all a variety of gifts. But they need to be tried and tested, and developed as we use them, especially as we use them for others. The Holy Spirit gives that desire to reach out and use our gifts. The Holy Spirit nudges us to take the first step, puts people in front of us that need us to take a step and move toward to them. It begins in the family. With time, we start to reach out beyond the family.

That is how the Spirit takes us as we are, often selfish, and turns us into someone generous and kind. Relationships open our heart. In a similar way, the spirit takes someone who may so need to be right that they are always creating dissension and division, and helps them grow in patience and self control. They see the damage to relationships their behavior causes, they see how others have such better relationships, and in it all, the Holy Spirit is working a transformation. The journey from rivalry to peace is similar. So too from lust to genuine love. That person we want to share the rest of our life with changes everything.

There’s more. So we all have innate gifts. We start to use them in our family, then our family of faith, and beyond. The Holy Spirit helps us see where they are needed. The Spirit strengthens our gifts, and tempers our faults. In reaching out, we begin to see those we may assist as brothers and sisters, not problems to be managed. We see beyond our differences to how much we are the same.

We begin to learn about caring in our family. Then when our caring extends beyond the family, we almost always end up being around others who are likewise trying to be of help, but who have been at it longer. In a community of service, the Spirit shapes us both ways, through those we serve, and through those among whom we serve.

So the birthday card listing the fruit of the Spirit applies to us as a potential inside in our younger years. But with time, using our gifts, first in our family, then in the family of the church, when we can, in the wider community, all those good qualities can grow and become more and more evident. Sometimes it comes full circle. Need takes us from using gifts that have grown over the years, including outside the family, right back to the home, as children care for the parents who taught them to care.

As I spent time with these readings, especially the first one, a specific example came to mind. Luke mentions people from all over the world coming to Jerusalem, speaking different languages. I picture refugees coming to Rochester, speaking different languages. I see our faithful volunteers at Saints Place set up their apartments. They help them get the clothing they need, they get to know the refugees, some tutor them, all develop friendships. The different languages are no barrier to the language of love, the language of joy: being welcomed with love and respect, or the joy of making a difference; The language of peace, of patience, of kindness, of generosity … That birthday card again.

Want to see even more of that fruit in your life? There are many ministries under the umbrella of St. Louis. We also know there are many other ministries out in the community, and as you help
us compile a list of those places where our parishioners are involved, we will share that for everyone. We would like to focus our tithing efforts on places you value, by giving of your time and talent. Knowing the places folks in the parish serve, we can better help those looking for involvement to get connected.

But today, again with that beautiful image of Jerusalem filled with people from all over, speaking various languages, I invite you to picture our Saints Place staff, volunteers, and the refugees, holding out their arms to you. Take a few steps that way, however hesitant. Volunteer. You will get more out of it than you give, once you let yourself experience the community of service, others who will inspire you, and true needs that call forth our best efforts, you will be able to open that birthday card with Paul’s list, and instead of thinking “who is he talking about”, you can just smile, and whisper a thank you to the Holy Spirit.