People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been baseball. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But baseball has marked the time. This field, this game: it’s a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again. Oh... people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

Remember that? It’s from the classic movie, Field of Dreams, where actor James Earl Jones, as a reclusive writer speaks with heart and conviction about the importance of baseball.

I love it when someone asks, “What are your favorite movies of all time?”

My list will include Forest Gump, The Graduate, Braveheart, a couple of Bond movies, Casablanca, Grand Torino, Trouble with the Curve,…and, of course, Field of Dreams.

So this week, I have been thinking about Pentecost, that day fifty days after Easter when the Holy Spirit burst onto the scene in Jerusalem and the movement called the church began. It was wild and exotic.

A minister during the children’s sermon was explaining Pentecost and said to the kids, “Pentecost was when the church was seated in a circle and tongues of fire came down from heaven, landed on their heads and spoke the gospel in all the languages of the world.”

One six year old said: “I must have been absent that Sunday!”

In thinking about Pentecost, I thought of the movie, Field of Dreams. Pentecost is the birth-day of the church. It seems to me that the church was born that day as a field of dreams…..both for God and for us.

I suspect most of us have seen this movie, now twenty-five years old. And if you haven’t or it’s been a while, here’s the story line:
A young Iowa farmer Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) hears a voice in his corn field say to him, “If you build it, he will come.” He interprets this message as an instruction to build a baseball field on his farm, and when he does, who shows up but the ghosts of Shoeless Joe Jackson and seven other Chicago White Sox players who were banned from the game for deliberately losing the 1919 World Series. When the voice continues, Ray seeks out a reclusive author (played by James Earl Jones) to help him understand the meaning of the messages and the purpose for the field. We find that the field is a place of unfinished business, a place where broken dreams get a second chance.

Why do I think about this baseball movie on Pentecost? Well, let me substitute a couple of words from that scene where Jones talks about the importance of baseball. Think of baseball as the church.

So it would go this way — People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, Ray, has been the church. America has rolled by like an army of steamrollers. It has been erased like a blackboard, rebuilt and erased again. But the church has marked the time. This sanctuary, our mission, it’s a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again. Oh... people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

I

The church has been around since about 30 AD, and it has developed, morphed, split, splintered, been through rebirths and re formations, and has both a marvelous history, and at times, a sad, tragic, history. There are a lot of critics of the church, and sometimes for good reason. Some critics are outside the church, some inside the church, and some are part of one church criticizing another. God knows the church is flawed, regardless of what church and regardless of any period of history one might cite. And it is easy to be cynical about the church, or choose not to be a part of the church.

But perhaps our edge on cynicism, or rethinking, staying away from a flawed church is when we remember that Pentecost was God’s breaking into history to establish the church. The church was not a human idea. I mean disciple Peter did not gather the disciples after the resurrection and say: “Well, friends, we are in a mess and we are lost. Jesus, our Lord, teacher, leader and friend has left us, and we have no method to carry forth his message. So, I propose that we establish an organization, divide it into committees and task groups and call it the ecclesia, the church of Jesus Christ. We’ll bring in a consultant on organizational development and design a strategic plan to carry out the message and purposes of God in the world.”

No, fortunately, the church did not begin with Peter’s or any human initiative but with God’s mighty Spirit sweeping into Jerusalem and into the lives of people. Why?

Because God decided the church was needed. The church is God’s idea. This is what makes the church so very different from other volunteer organizations. Whereas volunteer and community
groups start out as a grassroots movement from the bottom up, the church started from the top down. We are only here because God says we are God’s instrument for God’s purposes in the world. Period.

Pentecost is a reminder of whose church this is. Though we may say and think that First Presbyterian, for instance, is our church (and though we certainly mean no harm by that), we should always remind ourselves that this is not our church but God’s.

It makes us different from any other organization or institution. We are not a club. We are not a humanitarian relief organization. We are not a non-profit agency. We are not a business. We are not a volunteer organization. We are not a fraternal society. We are the church, God’s church, and God established the church to be a Field of Dreams for his purposes.

People will come, Ray. The one constant through all the years, has been the church. This sanctuary, our mission… it's a part of our past, Ray. It reminds us of all that once was good and it could be again. Oh... people will come, Ray. People will most definitely come.

It is easy to get discouraged about the church, and easy to be disappointed when the church is not what we would like for it to be. So on Pentecost, when we are celebrating the birth of the church, it is good to remember what God has accomplished through the church:

The church has given and still gives the world ideals…ideals such as religious and political liberty, ideals such as racial unity, social justice, peace among people, love for our neighbors, even our enemies. Who speaks out for the poor? Who led the battle against human slavery in this nation in the nineteenth century? Who has been in the forefront of America’s quest for racial and gender equality?

Nowadays social agencies and non-profit organizations often meet the human needs of society: we have agencies dedicated for the alleviation of poverty and homelessness; agencies that promote foster care, adoption; centers for aging care; and a thousand other worthwhile causes.

At one time those agencies were identified with the church, which is no longer the case. Yet, it is often the church who, historically, was part of such an agencies’ formation, and was the compassionate spirit and leadership behind it…and it has been and still is the church’s people, who support it and run it.

Look at the boards, look at the volunteers, and see if they are not full of the church’s people.

G. K. Chesterton, British journalist and Christian thinker, said when tree branches and leaves are waving wildly in the wind, people think of it in two different ways. Most have believed the wind moves the trees. But in more modern days, many folks assume that it is the movement of the trees that creates the wind.
This is to say that people see agencies such as Habitat for Humanity, Wheels for Hope, Urban Ministry, StepUp Greensboro, The Children’s Home Society and think…those agencies stand alone and apart from the church. But what I know, and you know, is that God’s church is the wind behind those agencies …that those agencies were brought into existence by churches and church people, that churches and church people organized them, support them, run them, and volunteer in them.

The church is a Field of Dreams for God’s purposes.

II

But the church is also our Field of Dreams. So what dreams come with you this morning or what broken dreams remain as unfinished business? What unfinished business leads to a life of meaning and life of meaning, substance and purpose. What the church does is help us see the right priorities in our dreams.

One of the characters in Field of Dreams is Archibald “Moonlight” Graham, played by Burt Lancaster. He was a ballplayer that got into one major league baseball game as a late-inning defensive replacement at the end of a season. But the game ended with his standing on deck to be the next at bat. He never got to hit. He was sent to the minors, and after a season, he went to medical school.

Through the movie’s strange turn of events Ray (Kevin Costner) finds Moonlight Graham as an old man. Graham is now “Doc” Graham, the doctor in a small Minnesota town.

Costner tells Graham about his baseball Field of Dreams: “Well, you know, I never got to bat in the major leagues. I’d have liked to have had that chance just once, to stare down a big-league pitcher. To stare him down, then just as he goes into his windup, wink. Make him think you know something he doesn’t. That’s what I wish for. The chance to squint at a sky so blue that it hurts your eyes just to look at it. To feel the tingle in your arm as you connect with the ball. To run the bases, stretch a double into a triple. That's my wish.”

Costner says: “It would kill some men to get so close to their dream and not touch it. They’d consider it a tragedy.”

“Son,” Doc says, “If I had only been a doctor for five minutes, that would have been a tragedy.”

The church is our Field of Dreams helping us to discover the right priorities for our life, which lead us to a life of meaning, substance, and purpose. Without the church, as our Field of Dreams, we can live for a lifetime majoring in the minors and the superficial.
Today, on its birthday, we tip our hat to the church. For when the world is out of joint, the church is our constant inspiration for what is noble. People have come and will come to have faith strengthened, thoughts clarified, ideas lifted, convictions born, and characters created.

Yes, Ray, they will definitely come.