

Born of the Spirit

One of the most powerful truths of our faith as Christians is that we aren't just slaves or strangers in God's house. We are His children. Paul tells us in Romans that "those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God," (Rom. 8:14). He continues, "The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship, And by Him we cry, 'Abba, Father,'" (verse 15). It's a deeply intimate, trusting way of addressing God. He goes on to tell us that "if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ," (verse 17).

This is a beautiful image with which we can begin Pentecost Sunday. There's nothing for us to fear, because we belong. Pentecost is often called "the Birthday of the Church," and it certainly is. But it's more than that.

It's the day we remember when the Holy Spirit came down to inspire, empower, and to make us a family. To fully adopt us. And to make us one. Today we're going to explore how the events of Pentecost recorded by Luke in Acts 2:1-21 reveal the heart of the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Adoption. **Read Acts 2:1-21.**

A Promise Fulfilled – God's Spirit for God's People

In our passage, we hear how the earliest believers were gathered together in one place on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost was originally a feast day in the Jewish faith, fifty days after Passover. They used it to celebrate and thank God for the first fruits of the harvest. It was a time to give thanks to God for His care, and the abundance of the harvest. But now, it becomes the harvest of something new.

Suddenly, there is the sound of a rushing, violent wind, filling the house where they were sitting. Divided tongues like fire rested on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in different languages, (Acts 2:2-3, paraphrased). This moment fulfilled the promise Jesus made before He ascended. He said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth," (Acts 1:8).

More than power, what came to the disciples was presence. God's very breath. Let's be clear here, this wasn't a once-and-done sort of thing. It wasn't a temporary inspiration. It was the start of a new kind of life. John Wesley called it the Spirit's "witness with our spirit" that we are children of God.

The Holy Spirit coming at Pentecost shows us that God's Spirit isn't reserved for a few elite or exceptionally holy individuals. The Spirit of God – we hear this near the end of our passage in the quote from the Prophet Joel – is “poured out on all flesh,” (Acts 2:17). Look again at verses 17-21. It reads:

“In the last days,” God says, “I will pour out My Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. Even on My servants, both men and women, I will pour out My Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. I will show wonders in the heavens above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved,” (Acts 2:17-21).

The Spirit of God is poured out on ALL flesh – sons and daughters, young and old, male and female, slave and free. Everyone who calls out to God will be saved. Friends, this is the Spirit that adopts. This is the Spirit who says to us, and to all people, “You belong.” Or, as Jeremiah was told, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations,” (Jer. 1:5), and to Isaiah, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are Mine, (Isa. 43:1).

Reversing Babel

When the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost, other people – besides the disciples – heard it. We're told, “There were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven. When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard their own language being spoken,” (Acts 2:5-6). The crowd starts questioning, “Aren't these guys Galileans?” And then Luke records a list of the languages being spoken: fifteen by my count.

Pentecost is the great reversal of the Tower of Babel, found in Genesis 11. At Babel, humanity tried to reach heaven on their own terms. God confused their language and scattered them. But here at Pentecost, God comes down to us. Instead of confusion, there's clarity. The disciples speak in many tongues – and people from every nation hear them “declaring the wonders of God” (verse 11) in their own languages. They're hearing the Gospel of Jesus Christ – that's what the disciples were talking about – they were telling them about Jesus.

The Spirit doesn't erase our differences – He honors them. Unity doesn't mean uniformity. The Church on Pentecost wasn't a melting pot. It was a mosaic. That's what the Spirit of Adoption does. He brings people together who have no natural reason to be united, and makes them His own family.

As Methodists, we emphasize a theology of grace given to all people. Prevenient grace goes before us, drawing every person toward God. Pentecost makes that visible. No one is left out. The Spirit isn't given to "insiders," or those with the "right" background. It's for all – even those Michigan fans! All joking aside, it's critical that we "get" this today. The divisions we see in the world – national, political, racial, economic – they're reminders that the world is aching for the unity that only the Spirit can give. The Church is called to be a torch-bearer for that unity – not because we're all alike, but because the Spirit brings us together.

A New Identity – From Fear to Boldness

Just weeks before the events Luke records in Acts 2, these same disciples were hiding behind locked doors, terrified that what had happened to Jesus was going to happen to them. But now, filled with the Holy Spirit, Peter stands up and preaches boldly to the crowd. If we were to read on past the lectionary passage for today, we'd see he preaches to them about Jesus. Simon Peter, the guy who denied Jesus three times.

He looks the same. But something's happened to him. He's a transformed man. He quotes the prophet Joel and declares that the outpouring of the Spirit means the last days have begun – God IS doing something new! And then he goes on to speak of Jesus' death, resurrection, and exaltation, and calls the people to repentance.

This is what the Spirit of Adoption does. He replaces our fear with courage. Our epistolary lesson this morning told us we don't receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. The Spirit makes us heirs, not prisoners. Pentecost empowers the Church to be a witness – of the message, and also to live it out in love, in justice, and in holiness.

John Wesley taught that not only does the Holy Spirit give us assurance of the forgiveness of our sins, but He also transforms our lives by His presence in us. The grace of God isn't just about pardon. It's about power – the power to live a holy life – to love our neighbor, and to reflect Christ. Holiness, to Wesley, isn't about perfectionism – trying to be flawless and faultless – no one can do that. To him, holiness was about perfect love. Perfect love comes from the Holy Spirit. Through His presence, we're enabled to love God with all our heart and love our neighbor as ourselves – that's Wesley's definition of perfect love. And that's the real boldness that Pentecost offers – a holy boldness rooted in love of God and others.

Adoption Lived Out – A Spirit-Filled Church

The Spirit of Adoption is more than just the personal relationship we have as individuals with God. It's also how we live together as the Church. Immediately after Pentecost, we see the Church forming a new kind of community. Acts 2:42 tells us the followers of Jesus "devoted themselves to the apostle's teaching, to fellowship, to the

breaking of bread and to prayer.” They also shared their possessions, cared for one another, and worshiped with joy, (verses 44-47, paraphrased).

This is what it means to be God’s adopted children. We become a family. And it’s not some lip-service type theoretical type of thing, but a real practice. Sometimes we experience some sibling rivalry, and butt heads – we have to keep ourselves focused on the Main Thing – Jesus. John Wesley viewed salvation as having both personal and social implications. He believed that for followers of Christ to be effective and growing in their faith, they needed to be organized into small groups, bands, and societies – to study and encourage each other in love and good works.

Wesley called the Church to works of mercy and piety. What he meant was doing things like feeding the hungry, visiting the sick, teaching children, and striving for justice. Speaking of children – VBS is coming up in a little over two weeks. We’re in desperate need of help for it. There’s a planning meeting tomorrow evening at 6:00. See, these aren’t add-ons. They’re signs that the Spirit of Adoption is alive in us. Is the Spirit of Adoption alive in you this morning?

To be filled with the Spirit is to be filled with compassion. To be adopted by God is to adopt one another. That means making space for others, forgiving freely, and serving joyfully. The early Church didn’t just receive the Spirit – they lived it!

Becoming What We Shall Be

The Apostle John writes, “Beloved, we are God’s children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when He is revealed, we will be like Him, for we will see Him as He is,” (1 Jn. 3:2, NRSV). Someone made up a song about this verse, and they sang it last year at Annual Conference, and in my head, I can still hear our previous bishop, Gregory Palmer’s deep baritone voice ringing through the auditorium. The verse captures the “in-between” tension we experience as Christians living below here and now, but with our permanent citizenship in God’s kingdom. We are God’s children now – that’s our current identity, secured by the Spirit of Adoption. But we are also “becoming.” The Spirit is still shaping us, refining us, and growing us into better image-bearers – better mirrored reflections of Christ.

In some of his sermons, John Wesley talked about “entire sanctification.” It’s not instant perfection. It’s the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make us more like Jesus in heart, mind, and life. Oftentimes we think of Pentecost as a one-time event in history. I want to challenge us to think of Pentecost – specifically the coming of the Holy Spirit – as an on-going movement of God, making and shaping us more fully into who we were always meant to be.

We may not yet see the fullness of what we shall be – especially in this life – but we live in hope. The Spirit is the down payment – the guarantee of what is to come.

When we feel weak, the Spirit reminds us we're not alone. When we're broken, the Spirit testifies that we are still beloved. When we feel lost, the Spirit calls to us, and guides us home.

The World Needs The Holy Spirit

We live in a world where people are desperately looking to belong. So many are lonely, anxious, and uncertain about their place in the world. They're told they're not enough, not worthy, and not lovable. Down through the ages, the Church has carried, and given, that messed up message to different people at times. The message of Pentecost is this: you are wanted, welcomed, and included in God's family.

The Spirit of Adoption is God's answer to a world torn by division. When the Church is filled with this Spirit, we don't just speak different languages. We also listen. Singing isn't the only thing we do together. We also suffer together, rejoice together, and serve together. We become a sign of God's kingdom.

This is the mission of the Church – to be a Spirit-filled, Spirit-led community of adopted children who bear witness to God's love. Wesley's movement, which eventually became known as Methodism, was fueled by this vision. It wasn't just preaching forgiveness – that's what a lot of churches do today – it was more about spreading "scriptural holiness throughout the land," those are John Wesley's words, by the way. The scriptural holiness is the mark of a family living in the Spirit. The Church in general today, has a long ways to go to hit the mark of spreading scriptural holiness throughout the land. We aren't perfect, but we have God's promises! We're not finished, but we're filled with the Spirit! We aren't abandoned – we've been adopted!

We Are God's Children Now

"Beloved, we are God's children now," (1 Jn. 3:2). Pentecost is not the end of the story. It's the beginning – of the Church, of new life, of the new thing God is doing. Even today, the Spirit continues to speak, to move, to adopt, and to renew.

You're not a stranger. You've not been forgotten. You are a beloved child of God. And the Spirit that was poured out on Pentecost is still being poured out – on all flesh, in every place, in every generation.

Prayer: Come, Holy Spirit. Come into our hearts. Adopt us again. Make us one. Make us Yours. Let the flame of Pentecost burn in our hearts. Let Your wind, Holy Spirit, carry us out, into a waiting world. Make us bold, make us holy, and make us Yours. In the name of Jesus Christ, our Brother and Savior, Amen.