

“THE INTIMATE PENTECOST”

A Sermon for Pentecost, May 15, 2016

Text: Romans 8:14-17

“When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16)

The real drama of Pentecost, at least the drama which fascinates me, is not the theatrical one which starts out with all the apostles together in one place when suddenly there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. I am not so interested in “special effects”—divided tongues, “as of fire,” resting on each of them. Or even the miraculously simulcast sermon by which everyone heard the gospel in their own language.

That drama is wonderful. We celebrate today the birth of the church, the beginning of the incredible spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ. But the drama I wish to focus on this morning is the continuing drama which comes out of the other one, and never ends. It is a microscopic drama which plays out over and over and over in all our hearts, and in the heart of every believer in Jesus Christ.

The “drama” is a conversation. A discussion inside each of us, all the time. A deep and consequential dialogue which takes place under the surface, while we do everything we do. That hidden drama is what gives shape to our words and actions, and makes us the people we are.

Who takes part in that conversation which determines our life? The voices are those of our parents, friends, strangers, authors, teachers, billboards, television shows . . . All of the input we are receiving, and all we have filed away from the past. Our past. It must be a fascinating conversation. At times some of the participants come to blows, I’m sure, arguing for one direction or the other. And

much of it, though not all of it, takes place subconsciously. In our heart, our mind, our spirit.

Amid the often confusing jumble of guidance we receive from our memory, and the counsel we receive from other people on an ongoing basis, whether off the internet or from someone in the room with us, there is one voice which is quite different from all the others. It is the voice of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of the resurrected Christ.

Just as surely as the Holy Spirit opened the mouths of the apostles and spoke the gospel to thousands of people in old Jerusalem, the Holy Spirit is addressing you and me. Continuously. In the midst of life. Wherever we are. Paul tells us in Romans 8:16 what the Holy Spirit says to us. The contribution the Holy Spirit is making to the conversation about who we are and what we should do next.

The Holy Spirit “bears witness,” he says, “that we are children of God.”

You may have seen images of a person with a devil on one shoulder, whispering into one ear, and an angel on the other shoulder, whispering into the other ear? Forget that image. In that image, usually, the devil is telling a person to do something wrong, and the angel is saying not to do it.

But Paul does not say that the Holy Spirit is whispering instructions to us or reproofing us. Not at all. The Spirit is reminding us who we are: “Children of God.”

When we cry “Abba! Father!” it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

Whatever our situation of need or suffering or anxiety or fear we turn to God and call upon God, this is what is happening. (For example.) Some voices are telling us what to be afraid of. Others are reminding us what we want. Other voices still raise up our duty. Others remind us what happened in similar situations, to ourselves, or to other people. Another voice says “hurry up!” Another cautions us not to take precipitous action. We rapidly turn our attention from one voice to the other, trying to “make up our mind” what to do.

But above the jumble of other voices comes one with a very sweet message. It says, with authority, “you are one of God’s children. You belong to God, who gave his only Son to die for you, so that you might be adopted back into the family you belong to. God loves you with the same love he has for all his children.”

That voice makes a difference. It is recognizably the voice of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God. It is not just a minority opinion, although it is one voice among many. It is the voice of almighty God. It has authority. If we will listen to it, we will have peace and we will not be afraid. Instead, we will be grateful and rejoice.

But the voice doesn’t stop there. It goes on. The voice of the spirit of adoption says “if you are a child of God, you are also an heir of God, joint heir with Christ.”

That means, you do not have to be afraid of the future. The future is given to you, and will be given to you, by God who is eternal and who loves you. This is guaranteed to those who are in Christ. Because Christ inherits, so do you. Because he is risen, so shall you rise.

And it doesn’t stop there. It goes on. “if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”

Don’t misunderstand the word “if.” This does not mean that your suffering is the price you have to pay in order to be glorified with Christ! Rather, it means that if you suffer with him instead of without him, you will also be glorified with him. It is being bound to Christ in baptism (see Romans 6) which unites our fate with the fate of Jesus Christ.

That is what the spirit of Christ, the spirit of adoption, whispers to all who are willing to be quiet and listen.

That is the contribution God makes in Christ to the confusing internal conversations we are always having about the meaning of life and how to live. And what to do next.

The spirit is “bearing witness”—testifying under oath, in the courtroom of our hearts, that we are in fact—because of the forgiveness of our sins—certifiably children of God, and if children then heirs.

This drama takes place in real time, as we go through the day. We are blessed to know this fact about ourselves, a fact which changes everything. This drama produces effects which are so multitudinous and so small that you and I cannot begin to track it. It is granular. Its influence on our lives is vast. Impossible to measure.

And Paul is not saying “Do it this way.” He is saying, “this is what is happening whenever, in your situation, you call upon God. Whenever you say “Abba, Father!” as though God is not your interrogator and judge but is your father who loves you? That is what comes out of this internal drama.

So, don’t be overwhelmed by the story about wind and fire. Think red, all right, but imagine red blood cells carrying oxygen to exhausted cells so they can keep doing their work. Think Holy Spirit bearing witness to your spirit, your very own spirit inside you, that you are a child of God. Amen.