

6/5/2022 WORSHIP SERVICE - PENTECOST

MORNING PRAYER – PASTOR LOIS HARDER

O God, you are the one who has created us, you've redeemed us, you sustain us from day to day and moment to moment. On this day we remember and give thanks for your gift of the Holy Spirit sent to your people as breath, wind, fire, courage, life – your very presence *with* us. It is your Spirit of divine mystery and love, God, that guides and nudges us, leads us and whispers to us if we'll only listen. We confess, Lord, that we often move too fast, talk too loudly and play too hard to be attentive to you and your Holy Spirit. We confess that we truly want to be your faithful people. We want to listen and to follow and so, with your help, we'll try to listen more carefully, to let our lights shine more brightly, to tread more gently, to love more boldly.

We confess and proclaim, God, that *you* are the healer of our every ill and, O Lord, our world is ill. This world is wounded and hurting, God – sometimes the wounds are self-inflicted, and sometimes they're caused by others. Sometimes the hurts are so much bigger than one or two people; they're systemic and institutional. But your love is the salve and the source of healing for all of our wounds, great God. O Lord, help us to look carefully, as if through telescopes and microscopes, at this planet. Give us the courage and the knowledge, the motivation and the commitment to care urgently for the earth. We ask for your compassion and tender mercy on those who are grieving the loss of children and other loved ones to the madness of violence. We ask for your wisdom and kindness to prevail in the minds of those who are responsible for public safety and the greater good.

Healer God, we pray for Diana Schunn. Comfort her and come to her with your peace as she waits for a new heart. Be with her family and loved ones as they wait with her. Fill the distance between here and her hospital bed with your love. Be with Susan Voth as she recuperates and heals – we thank you that she is not experiencing pain. Continue to be with Rannie Schmidt, O God. Give him your comfort and peace also, as he heals.

Help each one of us to be aware of your Holy Spirit now as we continue to worship you – in Spirit and in truth, as Jesus taught us! Bless our time together and open our hearts to the messages that each of us needs to hear from you. Amen.

OFFERING PRAYER

Adapted from Ann B. Day, from *Sing the Journey* 148

God, you have shown us the meaning of generosity in the rich diversity of creation,
in the overflowing love of Christ Jesus,
in the never-ending gift of the Holy Spirit.

You have abundantly blessed us and called us
to be a community that honors each other,
to be servants to others with joy

to share our love and material possessions.

Let us rejoice in what we have been given and in what is ours to give. Amen.

BELONGING RATHER THAN FEAR – PASTOR CALEB YODER

Romans 8:14-17

If you don't like having to sit through a long scripture reading, today is your day. I chose this passage because not only is it about the Holy Spirit, but it gets right at a very important point that seems very timely these days.

This Holy Spirit that we are invited to receive is not a Spirit of slavery to lead us back into *fear*, Paul says. We may have trouble understanding slavery, but we know what fear is like.

I had a number of childhood fears, many of them irrational. One of them was tornado slides. I have this clear memory at the end of the Kindergarten year, of our class coming to the main square of the town. There was a standalone metal slide structure, with steep steps up to the top.

For whatever reason, I joined the other kids waiting in line, maybe thinking I wouldn't be afraid this time. But when I reached the top, I just couldn't go down. Maybe it was something to do with not being able to see the bottom. The slide just spiraled downward, as if to swallow up anyone who dared to go down.

So I decided to turn around and go back down the steps. Ironically, this was probably riskier than the slide, because the steps were filled with all the other kids waiting in line. With embarrassment and maybe a bit of defeat, I slid past the other kids gripping the handrail.

On Pentecost, we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit poured out upon the followers of Jesus, and resulting in the birth of the church. This short segment of Romans 8 is among the readings that churches in many places that follow a lectionary might be reading this Sunday on Pentecost.

It is from the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Rome, a congregation that he had not yet visited at the time when he wrote the letter. Romans 8 repeats the word "Spirit" many times, and is Paul's answer to the human predicament of being caught in the power of Sin, both individually and collectively.

There is now no condemnation for those who are connected to Christ Jesus, because a different ruling force – the Spirit of life – has freed us from the rule of Sin and death. You see a lot of the theme of slavery in this chapter, and I'll acknowledge that none of us have personal experience of slavery, nor generational trauma or passed-down memories as would be the case in many African American communities.

Although Paul doesn't name it explicitly, the Exodus story is probably partly behind what he writes. In the Exodus story, the Israelites were enslaved in Egypt. Yet Israel is also called (as a people group) God's "son."

So God rescues them, leading them by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night away from slavery, away from oppression, toward the Promised Land. Maybe this is the image Paul has in mind when talking about “children of God” led by the Spirit.

Also behind the passage is the comparison with a wealthy household in which someone who was not a biological child is adopted as a son or daughter. I don’t know exactly how adoption in the ancient world compared with how adoption works today, but we can readily understand the metaphor.

I have an uncle and aunt that adopted two children and later had two biological children. They were all older than me, but I grew up very much thinking of them like my cousins the same as all my other cousins.

Often, we use the phrase "children of God" as a way to talk about God's loving embrace of all humanity. We talk about all people as "children of God." I believe that is a perfectly acceptable way of using those words. Surely our loving God views us as children from the start. Yet that isn't the same thing as people knowing themselves as children of God.

When the New Testament talks about "children of God" it is telling a story of becoming. A story of redemption. It's not talking about our identity as humans created in the image of God but our redemption as people otherwise disinherited, now adopted into God's household.

In Paul's account of the story, because we are under the power of Sin, we are like enslaved people without any legal rights or inheritance.

Adoptive parents might say that the child they adopted at one time was not their child, and now they are. Once a child is adopted, genes do not matter. There is no difference between biological children and an adopted child. Both are equally loved, equally embraced, equally share responsibility and ownership in the family, and equally share any inheritance.

Paul says that by the Spirit we cry out to God, “Abba Father.”

Abba is an Aramaic word that was spoken by children and adults alike to address their fathers. If Jesus taught the Lord’s Prayer in Aramaic, it probably began with “Abba.” Abba is an intimate word, and it is really interesting that Paul uses it in a letter to the church at Rome, because it shows that this Aramaic word was part of the prayer-language of Christians of many languages.

OK, I get that talking about God as Abba doesn’t feel like such a novel idea to most of us. But we don’t usually think about the implications.

For centuries, Christians have spent lots of energy working out what exactly was Jesus’ relationship to God. We have affirmed that Jesus was fully man and yet fully God. But there has been much discussion of how that works exactly, how do the diverse writings of the New Testament fit into that claim.

Yet we completely bypass are all the verses that speak of the spiritual path of the Christian one of such close identification with Christ that we eventually hope to have the same sort of relationship to God as Jesus.

In Paul's theology, Jesus identified with the plight of humanity to the point of dying on the cross. In parallel fashion, those who trust in God's faithfulness through Jesus become identified with Christ, embracing our suffering as if suffering "with Christ" ...then rising from spiritual and physical death and becoming, like Christ, as "sons" and "daughters" of God. We are "co-heirs" with Christ, as if we share the divine inheritance on equal terms.

I don't know about you, but I would be hesitant to call myself a "son of God," especially if that's comparing myself to Jesus. The early Church teacher Irenaeus of Lyons said, *"because of his boundless love, Jesus became what we are that he might make us to be what he is."*

Later in the chapter, even the physical creation joins in this drama, which is important to remember in an age of ecological destruction. In parallel language to "slavery to fear," creation is in "slavery to decay." In addition to being Pentecost, today also happens to be World Environment Day. Creation too awaits redemption.

Going back to verse 15 we read, *"You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children."*

To be adopted, to belong to God's family, *this* is the opposite of being enslaved to fear.

Right now, it feels like there is too much to make us feel fear. Take your pick:

- Mass shootings
- Political polarizations as if we are in a "cold civil war."
- Worsening economic and racial inequality
- Uncertainty about the economy.
- The effects of climate change, especially on the poorest.
- Division felt in the broader church and even the differences felt in our own congregation.
- Fear of decline for the church or heading the wrong direction.
- Or more personal fears, such as health concerns, job uncertainty, fear of losing someone you love or losing a relationship.

There is a lot to make us feel fear! It's not a sin to be afraid. Fear is a God-given emotion that when healthy serves the purpose of alerting us to threat. Otherwise, our ancestors might have gotten eaten by saber tooth tigers.

But if what animates us, if what motivates us, if what mobilizes us – if it comes from fear, *then it is not from God.*

Perhaps the most common phrase in the Bible is: "Don't be afraid." "There is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18).

The opposite of fear isn't being reckless. The opposite of fear also isn't safety, or certainty. The opposite of fear is the assurance that *you belong.*

You are God's child; you have been adopted. You are part of the family of God. You don't have to earn a status of belonging, or prove yourself. You also don't need to substitute false or very specific forms of belonging to the true and deeper belonging.

We have to be constantly mindful of how to ensure that anyone can feel a sense of belonging, both in our church culture, as well as the cultures of the different circles and spaces we inhabit. We can easily have blind spots, especially if we are used to feeling "at home." The first people we should think to reach out to, are those we can imagine might feel like "outsiders" or like they don't belong.

But the belonging of adoption also is more than that. For ourselves, belonging doesn't mean expecting to always feel accepted or to always feel perfectly safe. Belonging means being on a spiritual journey where you know deep within your own spirit that you belong.

Belong not to just one specific group of like-minded people who look like you, but rather belonging that can be shared across our divides as we live into our calling of Christlikeness. *"It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* (Rom 8:16 NRSV)

Sisters and brothers, let us know that this deep belonging is there for us in Christ, and this is the anchor that allows us to face our fears. We may feel afraid, but we remember this deeper belonging that will not let us go.

Let us loosen fear's hold on us, and trust that God's Spirit is at work. Trust that that there is this deeper truth behind the story of adoption into the family of God.

BENEDICTION

~Attributed to Clare of Assisi (Italy), ca.13th c.

Live without fear:

your Creator has made you holy,

has always protected you,

and loves you as a mother.

Go in peace to follow the good road,

and may God's blessing

be with you always.