

**Acts 2:1-21  
Romans 8:14-17**

**May 23, 2010**

**“The Spirit of Adoption”**

**The world has stolen the celebration of Christ's birth -- to such an extent that many Americans don't recognize the word "Christ" in Christmas, certainly many children don't. The world has reduced the celebration of Jesus' birth to a mid-winter family and snow festival. The world has also made serious raids upon the meaning of Jesus' resurrection, turning the central belief of the New Testament into a rite of spring. Pentecost is the one Christian festival that the world hasn't co-opted. There are few if any "Pentecost sales" in our department stores and truck and auto sales lots. No TV advertisements or Chamber of Commerce parades hijack it. Pentecost is ours. It's miraculous.**

**There's nothing like it in the world. Because of this, it is all the more ironic that in our current Christian usage, Christmas and Easter outshine Pentecost.**

**As a day of celebration, it has its origins in the history found in Acts 2:1-21. It tells of early Christians, mostly Jewish/Christians, who had made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the ancient celebration of the wheat harvest in Old Israel, which later became associated with the giving of the Law to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It was at this event and time that the Holy Spirit came as a rushing wind to those disciples. This event, described by St. Luke, happened 50 days after Easter, hence the name Pentecost. It became the day for Christians to celebrate and give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost, of course, was not just a one day event;**

**it is an era. When the Holy Spirit began to be poured out on those new disciples it meant that the Gospel was no longer confined to Jesus' original followers. It was the fulfillment of the words of the Old Testament Prophet Joel when he spoke for the Lord, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people. . . Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days." We're in those days now.**

**"Do you not know," St. Paul wrote, "that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?" (I Cor. 6:19). Perhaps you didn't. Perhaps you didn't know God would go that far to make sure you became a member of his family. But he did and he does. [It wasn't enough for God to appear in a burning bush and then to dwell in the temple in Jerusalem. It wasn't enough for God to become human**

**flesh and walk on the earth. It wasn't enough to leave God's word and the promise of return. God went even further.] God was and is willing to take up residence with us.**

**Last week I stated that God has no grandchildren – we are either his children or we are not. By that I mean, we are not naturally God's children but, as the Scripture testifies, we can be adopted as children of God, giving us the privilege of calling upon God as our Father.**

**St. Paul writes, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. 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,” Romans 8:14-17.**

**These young folks, whom we confirm this day, have received instruction as to the meaning of church membership. But more importantly, they have been given opportunity to claim for themselves the promises of Christ, who offers forgiveness for your sin and mine, as well as theirs; and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who is able to make us God’s children; to make us stand without fear or shame in the glorious presence of the Almighty, and know him as Father. Today we confirm what the Holy Spirit has been doing in their lives to bring them to this day, and pray for the power of the Holy Spirit to be with them into the future, incorporating them into God’s own family.**

**This is no small thing – though perhaps it is taken for granted by many who are in church. Those who receive the Holy Spirit will be counted as sons and daughters of the living God. This is not a thing of the distant past, nor of the long-distant future, but a promise fulfilled today. Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (2 Cor. 3:17) – freedom from bondage to sin and fear of death. This same spirit makes sure our adoption into God’s own family, and so we are able to call upon God as “Abba, Father” like a child who knows that he/she is loved without reservation. The Holy Spirit gives every true believer to speak with a testimony distinct from that of his/her own spirit, or even the testimony of a good conscience. Now that is a crucial point. The Spirit gives each true believer the truth to speak – God’s**

**own truth, not tainted by our passions, or causes, or desires. And it is the Spirit that enables us to genuinely call God our Father, not just from our lips, but from our hearts; as only true children can.**

**Paul reminds us that we “did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but ... have received a spirit of adoption.” The spirit of bondage and fear is far removed from the loving Spirit of adoption, and those who are conditioned by slavish fear cannot be considered sons and daughters of God; though some may be servants of God and not far from the kingdom of heaven. Yet I would venture to say that a minority of people love God and are led by the Spirit, a few more may yet fear God, but the majority of people, perhaps even those in churches, have neither**

**the fear of God before their eyes, nor the love of God in their hearts.”<sup>1</sup>**

**Perhaps some of you, who now have found your salvation in Christ and are led by the Spirit of God, may remember the time when you were living in sin, but did not know it until you received the spirit of fear (which is also a gift of God); then in due course the fear vanished as the spirit of love filled your heart. Before one receives the spirit of fear – which opens one’s eyes to recognize one’s own sin – the “natural” man or woman is a stranger to the law of God, as to its true, inward, spiritual meaning. Ironically, he or she may be at rest and feel secure in this state. These person stand at the edge of the pit, but fear it not; for they cannot tremble at a danger they do not know. You**

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<sup>1</sup>John Wesley, “The Spirit of Bondage and Adoption,” (1746), *John Wesley’s Sermons, An Anthology*, Albert Outler & Richard Heitzenrater, ed; (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991), 134.

**know the old saying, “Ignorance is bliss.” They can have no fear of God because they know not God. If not saying in their hearts, “There is no God,” many say “God is all loving and merciful and I’m alright;” thereby confounding and dismissing in that unwieldy idea all of God’s holiness and essential hatred of sin, all his justice, wisdom, and truth. Such as believe in that manner are in essence saying that Christ came to save his people *in*, not *from* their sins, to bring them to heaven without holiness; despite his own words (Mt. 5:18) that, “Not one jot or tittle of the law shall pass away till all things are fulfilled.”**

**How interesting it is that many who are ignorant of God and of their own state of sin, and in no fear whatever of God’s judgment, should so easily be persuaded that they walk in great liberty. They style themselves as free**

**from the passions of weak and narrow souls, from superstition (the disease of fools and cowards), and from bigotry that is found in those who have not a free and generous way of thinking. And to be sure, these folks are free; free from the wisdom which comes from above, from holiness, and the whole mind which was in Christ.<sup>2</sup>**

**Those who live in this state are servants of sin, and content themselves with the notion, “Why should I fear, since God is merciful, and Christ died for sinners?” This leaves them contented to remain in bondage to sin, not even attempting to conquer it. Such is the state of every “natural” man or woman; whether they be gross, scandalous transgressors, or more reputable and decent sinners, having the form, though not the power of godliness.**

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 135.

**Yet to be truly free one must first move from the illusion of freedom, just described, and receive the spirit of bondage to fear, which St. Paul mentions. Indeed, the gospel is bad news before it is good news. We are in truth sinners; that is the bad news which we must recognize before we can understand the good news. But how can one be convinced of sin?**

**Either by some tragedy, or “hitting bottom,” or by God’s Word applied with the power of the Holy Spirit, God touches the hearts of those who do not see. It may happen in an instance, or by degrees, yet are the eyes opened to the reality of the state he or she is in. An unrelenting light glares upon the soul, and he or she at last sees that the loving, merciful God is also a consuming fire; a just God rendering to every person according to his or her works, up to and**

**including the imaginations of one’s heart. Once our eyes are truly opened we see and understand that “it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Nothing is hid from the blinding light of God’s righteousness. One who is convicted of their sin will see oneself as naked before God, stripped of all pretences to religion or virtue, and feeble excuses for sinning against God.<sup>3</sup> Now is he or she gripped by a spirit of fear; fear of the consequences of sin, in this life and the next; fear of punishment which is justly deserved; fear of death as being the gate to judgment and hell.**

**The person in this state truly desires to break loose from sin, and may begin to struggle with it, only to find that sin will not be conquered. This person discovers that the**

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid, 137.

**freedom they once believed was theirs is only bondage to sin. This is someone under the law –recognizing that God’s commandments are reality, yet unable to live by them, try as they might. Yearning for liberty, power, and love, while living in fear and bondage, one who truly desires freedom will cry out, “Who shall deliver me from this bondage to sin, from this body of death?”**

**The fear and bondage to sin ends when one is no more under the law, but comes under grace; the grace of God through Jesus Christ. One who has found grace, or favor in God’s sight, and has the power of the Holy Spirit reigning in his/her heart, is truly set free. As the Apostle says, the Spirit of adoption enables one to cry Abba! Father. The heavenly light no longer pierces the soul, highlighting one’s sin. Rather a healing light**

**breaks in, and God, who out of darkness commanded light to shine, shines in *one’s* heart. Now, instead of fearing God, this believer can look into the face of Jesus and see the glorious love of God, a pardoning love. His soul, your soul, my soul can cry out, “My Lord and my God.” We no longer need fear the wrath of God because the One who knew no sin, was made sin, so that our sin might be pardoned and we be made into the righteousness of God. We no longer look upon God as an angry judge, but as a loving Father.**

**As adopted sons and daughters of the living God the Spirit continually works in us to be and to do what God would have us be and to do. Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. Freedom not only from guilt and fear, but also from sin. The Spirit brings true freedom so that we are no**

**longer servants of sin, but children of God; and when we fight against sin, we prevail. The Holy Spirit is at work not only to give us strength to resist outward sinning, but is also continually at work to reform us from the inside, so that we take on the disposition of our true Father in heaven.**

**It is not sufficient to divide humanity into those who are sincere and those who are insincere. A person can be sincere in any of the three states described above: one could be sincere in the Spirit of adoption, or in the spirit of fear and bondage. One could be sincere in having neither fear nor love of God, for there are sincere unbelievers even as there are among believers. Being sincere or not is no proof that a person is in a state of acceptance to God. Let us examine ourselves then,**

**not only whether we are sincere, but whether we be in the faith. Examine carefully, what is the ruling principle of your soul? Is it love of God? Is it fear of God? Or is it neither? Is it, rather, love of pleasure, or ease, or gain, or reputation? Or are you a stranger to this whole affair and cannot imagine what I mean?<sup>4</sup>**

**God has prepared for these young people whom we confirm this day, and for us, better things than what we can find without the Spirit of adoption. We are not called to fear and tremble, like devils, but to rejoice and love, like angels. Ours is the inheritance of Jesus himself, the Son of God; an inheritance of the glories of God and life eternal. The Spirit makes us able to do what is good and acceptable and the perfect will of God. God gives us true liberty that comes not from**

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<sup>4</sup>Ibid, 142.

**any membership in this or that group, nor from rights given by any government, nor from our own pursuit of desires, but from the indwelling Holy Spirit who frees us from the snares of sin, our own ignorance of sin, and the fear of sin's consequence.**

**All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God, in a secure relationship with God, and are heirs of the blessings of God, together with Jesus. Though we may suffer for our life in the Spirit, we do so knowing that we suffer together with Christ and so are also glorified together with Him.**

**Let us always pray for the Spirit of God, on Pentecost, and every day.**