

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church, Modesto, California
The Coming of the Holy Spirit – The Day of Pentecost
Confirmation Sunday
May 30, 2004

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Romans 8:14-17

...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. ¹⁷ Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (NIV)

Who Are You? Listen to the Holy Spirit for the Answer.

Dear brothers and sisters, and especially you, our confirmands,

Have you ever heard the story about the prince and the princess who forgot who they were?

There once was a village at the foot of a high mountain. On the mountain lived a great king. In the village lived a young boy and a young girl. They were orphans. One day, however, the king came down the mountain and, without royal fanfare and attracting much attention, came to the boy and girl and adopted them. They were no longer orphans. Now they were children of the king!

Now, you would have thought that everything would have changed for this boy and girl. After all, they were now a prince and a princess. But they continued to live the lives of ordinary villagers. They experienced the same troubles, the same hardships, the same sadness as everyone else. And so, sometimes they forgot who they were; they forgot their true, royal identity.

The king found out about this. So one day, he came back to the village. He did so again without any fanfare. In fact, most people didn't even see him there. But he came to the prince and the princess and he reminded them of who they were. "You are a son and a daughter of the king! He loved you, chose you and adopted you. And do you see that shining castle on the mountain? That is your home. One day you will live there." The king's message lifted the hearts of children. So the king kept coming back. He kept coming and telling his children that, in spite of the fact that they often didn't seem like it, they were in fact his children and his heirs.

Today we have gathered to celebrate some special events. One is the coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost. That was an event that took place on the fiftieth day after the first Easter, when God the Holy Spirit came with special blessings for his people. Today we also observe the rite of confirmation,

celebrating the work the Holy Spirit has done in seven of our young people over several years of Bible study.

As we meet today and listen to God's Word in Romans chapter eight, we are reminded of something that relates to Pentecost and confirmation and the Holy Spirit and to that little story about the prince and princess who forgot who they were. We are reminded of the fact that we, too, sometimes forget who we are. And if that's never happened to us before, we can be sure it will. Do you confirmants doubt that this could happen? I bet if I asked the adults here if they've ever forgotten that they were children of God, many would say it has happened to them. And if I ask you a couple years from now if you have ever forgotten that you were royal sons and daughters of God, I bet you would say yes.

It can happen. Even the strongest Christian can ask, "Who am I?" After all, our lives look a lot like the lives of everybody else on earth. Same problems, same hardships. But here's what I'd like to encourage you to do today. When the question "Who are you?" comes up, then listen to the Holy Spirit for the answer.

He gives us a new relationship with God

We spoke to God a few minutes ago, and we said, "I am altogether sinful from birth. In countless ways I have sinned against you and do not deserve to be called your child." Whoa. Those words are familiar to us, and so they might have lost some of their impact. But what we said has huge implications. "I do not deserve to be called your child." What we're saying is that we do deserve to be banished from God's sight forever. We do deserve to be cut off from his presence and all the good things that God has in store for us. And it's true. We did come into this world as sinful people, not the people God wanted us to be. And on top of that, we've turned against God in many ways. We haven't loved God with all our hearts and minds. We haven't loved the people around us the way God wanted us to. It hurts to say, but it's true: "We do not deserve to be called God's children.

What we do deserve is to spend the rest of our lives on earth being afraid of God, wondering what he's going to do to us. I picture it as some character in a movie who has committed a crime but not yet been caught. Every day he wonders, "Is today the day? Is today the day I get caught and punished for what I've done?" That's not a peaceful life.

Friday in our examination I asked you the question, "What can we do to change things between us and God?" And you answered correctly: "Nothing." We just don't have the ability to get rid of our sinfulness and come to God and convince him to love us and accept us. If it were up to us to get rid of our fear in the presence of God and change our relationship with him, we'd be lost.

But this is where the Holy Spirit comes in. The Holy Spirit, who is truly God along with the Father and the Son, does his work. And you know what he does: he gives us a new relationship with God. He reaches out to us and finds us. Then he opens our eyes to the best news we could ever hear. He tells us that Jesus has come and taken the blame for all our sins. He tells us that Jesus loved us so much that he suffered and died for our sins so that we would never have to suffer

and die for them. He tells us that Jesus rose to life and gives life eternal. Then the Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe all that, to say, "It's true. Jesus did all that for me. God doesn't hate me and want to punish me. God loves me and sent his Son for me. God doesn't want to abandon me. He wants me to be close to him always."

The Holy Spirit enables us to relate to God in a whole new way. Instead of shaking in fear that God's going to smash us, we smile and know that God cares about us deeply. God even came down to the village and adopted us. The Holy Spirit gives us faith to believe that what we heard a little while ago is really true: "God, our heavenly Father, has forgiven all your sins. By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever. *You are his own dear child.*"

Paul the apostle wrote it this way: ...those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (That's you; you are sons and daughters of God!) For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. (You have a whole new attitude toward God; not one that says, "Is today the day God punishes me?" but one that says, "God has adopted me!") And by him we cry, "Abba, Father." Abba is the Aramaic word for "father". (If you saw *The Passion of the Christ*, you heard Jesus calling God the Father Abba.) Do you get what Paul is saying? He's saying that we don't talk to God this way: "God, the big Being out there who might decide one day to strike me with a bolt of lightning and turn me into a pile of smoldering ashes..." No, we now talk to God this way: "Dear Father..." We talk that way because the Holy Spirit has given us a new relationship with God.

So who are you? You are adopted children of God. The Holy Spirit sealed the adoption.

He testifies about who we really are

St. Paul continues in this section: The Spirit himself testifies... You probably know that the Scott Petersen murder trial is about to begin. In that trial we will hear about a lot of witnesses taking the stand. Before they begin giving their testimony, they will be asked to tell the truth. You know how it goes: "Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help you God?" Well, the Bible says that the Holy Spirit testifies. We heard Jesus say that about the Holy Spirit today, too (John 15:26). And when he does, he tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And he is God!

To whom does the Holy Spirit testify? To a jury? No. *To us.* Listen: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children." He testifies to us! The Holy Spirit talks to us, the new people God has made us. He talks to us, God's adopted sons and daughters. He talks to us, saying: "Listen. I'm going to tell you again who you really are. It doesn't matter if you're the most popular kid in school or the most hated. It doesn't matter who or what people say you are. What matters is who *God* says you are. And this is what God says: 'You are someone I've known forever, even before you knew me. You are someone I have loved with an everlasting love. You are someone I valued enough to send my one and only Son for. You are someone Jesus cared enough about to die for. You are

someone who was dead in your sins, but are now completely forgiven. You were dead, but now you are alive. And you will live forever, because my love and power will make it happen. This is who you really are: You are my own child.' This is the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. I am God."

Now, how does this happen? How does the Holy Spirit testify to us? Should you wait for some dream or some amazing experience when the Holy Spirit seems to be whispering in your ear? Is that how the Holy Spirit testifies? He could speak to you in that way. But usually it's a whole lot simpler than that. It's like in the story I told about when the king came down to talk to his adopted son and daughter. He came without fanfare, and most people didn't even see him. In the same way, the Holy Spirit comes to testify to us in ways that don't draw a lot of attention.

Think of what happens when you come to church. We usually begin by hearing name of the Triune God. Today, for instance, we heard, "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you." That's no accident, that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are mentioned. That reminds us of baptism. In Holy Baptism the Spirit brings us our new identities—we are children of God. So when we hear our family name—"Father, Son, Holy Spirit"—that's the Spirit testifying that we are God's children. Then in the service comes the announcement of forgiveness. Again, that's the Holy Spirit testifying that we are God's children. Then we sing and pray to God. And when we talk to God we don't do so as people afraid of him, but as the people we are—his children. Then we hear God's Word. This is not just the pastor reading from an old book. This is God speaking to us what we need to hear, as when a parent talks to a child. And in God's Word, one message stands out above all others. What is it? You guessed it: the good news that we are God's children because of what Jesus has done. The Holy Spirit is testifying that we are God's children. And the Lord's Supper—can't forget that. In it Jesus comes to us in his real body and blood and says, "No matter what you've done or what you've been, you are forgiven. My body died and my blood poured out for your sins. Now you can live assured that you are loved by God. You are his children." The Holy Spirit is at work in the Lord's Supper, giving us faith to believe and receive what Jesus is giving us, testifying to the fact that we are God's children.

Here in Romans eight, the apostle Paul adds something about our future, too: Now if we are children, then we are heirs— heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. If you were that prince or princess who had been adopted by the king (and, if you haven't figured it out by now, you *are*), you could live every day with this knowledge: that shining castle on the mountain is not only the king's home, but it's your home too. When the Holy Spirit testifies that we are God's children, we get a sneak preview of what's to come: being in God's presence forever, fully fed and satisfied by him.

But before we get there, we must suffer for a little while. We must put up with being treated badly. We must live in many ways as all the other people of this village called Earth live. Same hardships, same sadness. And, more than that, we

will suffer because we are sons and daughters of the king, as people make it hard for us to stay loyal to our Father.

There is a place I know about where people who follow Jesus are often forced to suffer. It's called... high school! In high school you'll encounter pressure (it varies depending on which high school you go to) to set aside your calling to be a child of God. Yet you will promise today to stay loyal to Jesus, no matter what. Who will help you? God the Holy Spirit. He will remind you that you are God's children. Whenever you come here to church, the Holy Spirit will be at work, confirming your identity as a child of God. God doesn't just tell you you're going to suffer for his sake and then leave you to do it all on your own. No, Jesus has suffered too. He is with you when you face hard things because you love God. And the Holy Spirit is with you and in you, enabling you to get through those hard times. He is the one who will bring you through this life to glory.

Which leads us to the end of the story. After many years, the king came back. But this time it wasn't simply to remind his adopted children of who they were. This time it was to bring them with him. And so he did. And so he will. You are children of God. When you wonder about that, don't listen to anyone but the Holy Spirit to tell you who you are. He will speak to you through his Word and his Sacrament. Listen to him, and remember who you are. Amen.