

June 4, 2017 – (Pentecost 1, Luk)

Sermon Text – Ephesians [4:1-7]; 5:16-26; Acts 2:1-4

- Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God...The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. -

When the Greek philosopher, Plato, was once told that a man in the city had been spreading slanderous charges against him, he answered: "Then I will live in such a way that no one will believe what he says." Plato had great faith in human possibility. He actually believed that we can change our lives in such a way as to apply virtue to everything we do. If we are rumored to be wrongdoers, then we simply need to put our minds to changing ourselves in such a way that we appear to be only doing what is right. St. Paul was not so optimistic. St. Paul saw that people were always messing up. St. Paul realized that people are always getting it wrong. St. Paul appreciated that people are always falling short, missing the mark and not fully succeeding in their attempts to turn their lives around. In short, St. Paul understood sin. He understood that human beings were incapable of perfecting themselves. He understood that apart from God, we simply do not have the ability to act our way into becoming completely virtuous.

Fortunately, St. Paul did not leave it at that. He knew that people were capable of good behavior. He had observed the change in his own life. He had gone from being a persecutor of Christ's church to becoming its greatest preacher. He would explain that all that began with his encounter with the risen Christ, when he was knocked off his feet and blinded by the light of Christ's presence. But, that wasn't the end of it. There was a process involved. There was a slow dawning upon him of the power he had been given through the working of the Holy Spirit in his life. He came to understand that he was not left all alone, on his own, to overcome the presence of sin in his life, but that God was there with him at every step, working in him through the Spirit to transform his life. In writing to the Galatians, he explains to them that this is part of their inheritance too as children of God. In chapter 4 of his letter, he writes, "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying,

‘Abba! Father!’ So, you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.”

For Paul, it all comes down to inheritance. We are who we are, not by virtue of our own abilities or accomplishments, but because we are children of God, adopted through baptism and confirmed by the presence of the Holy Spirit, which is at work in us to bring us faith. It is the Spirit which gives us the power to call God “Father!” It is the Spirit that gives us the ability to believe that God is our heavenly parent. It is the Spirit who enables us to bear fruit in our lives, fruits that demonstrate, as Plato had hoped, that “no one will believe” the slanderous rumors that are being spread about us. Through the Spirit, we become new people. Through the Spirit, we are changed. Through the Spirit, we are transformed to become the people God intends us to be as inheritors of the kingdom of God. And a person does not become an heir by virtue of their own doing. Inheritance is always a gift. It is the result of being claimed and named and designated by the one who holds possession of one’s inheritance. And it is a process by which we mature into full possession of that which we have been given. St. Paul points out that when they are children, heirs are protected under the care of a guardian, who is given the job of watching over their inheritance. But, when they become adults, they are able to take control of their inheritance, to begin to manage their own affairs and to live their lives by faith in what they have been given through the Lord Jesus Christ.

I think this is how Paul would see the events of the Day of Pentecost. Until that day, the disciples were being kept under a guardian. They had Jesus with them. He was teaching them, leading them, watching over them and making sure that they were being taken care of. But, then, he was gone. He ascended into heaven. But he had promised that they would be “clothed with power from on high.” In the process, they would be transformed. They would mature. They would begin to be the people that God had intended them to be. They would become the “fishers of folks” that Jesus had told them they would be. So, when the Spirit comes upon them, when the sound is heard like the rush of a mighty wind, when the tongues of fire rest above each of their heads, they begin to speak in ways that they have never before spoken. They speak and everyone can hear. They speak and everyone listens. They speak and everyone can understand, in their own language, in their own way of communicating. In that moment, life is transformed. The disciples are energized. They are empowered. And they are remade as Christ’s witnesses in full possession of their inheritance as children of God.

The change is not insignificant. The disciples are made into new people. They are changed from the little band of frightened followers hiding behind the locked doors of the upper room into bold proclaimers of the lordship of Jesus Christ and the kingdom of God, the Father. And their efforts begin to bear fruit, not only in the success of their witness, though the results are spectacular; but, in the changes that take place in their own lives. St. Paul would go on to tell the Galatians that the “fruit of the Spirit,” the result of having the Spirit empowering one’s mature life as a follower of Jesus, “is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” He goes on to say, “There is no law against such things.” In fact, these are the very things that give evidence of a transformed life. They are the very things that Plato had hoped would keep everyone from believing the slanderous things that were being said about him! May we all be empowered by the Spirit to live such lives!

Amen.