

May 27, 2018

Romans 8: 12-17

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“What We Receive”

One week ago, Christians everywhere celebrated Pentecost, the birth of the church. Pentecost remembers the day the power of the Holy Spirit blew into the room where Jesus' followers were gathered, how the Spirit filled their hearts, transformed their minds, and empowered them to carry Christ's message into the world. Pentecost is a big day. In acknowledgement of that, I humbly confess I did not go to church last Sunday. For a preacher not to be in worship on such an important day as Pentecost is unusual, to say the least, and it was the first Pentecost I've missed in thirty-four years of ministry. It happened because a group from our congregation had just finished a tour in England, a trip that focused on our Methodist heritage and the life of our founder, John Wesley. A smaller number of our group extended the trip into Ireland for a few days and that landed our travel home exactly one week ago, on Pentecost Sunday. So, as Christians the world over gathered to sing songs about the Holy Spirit and hear the reading from the Book of Acts, when Peter and the others were inspired to proclaim the gospel, our group was moving through airports and I sat in a very cramped airplane passenger seat trying to get the in-flight entertainment system to work to my advantage. Trust me, eating a small bag of pretzels and drinking coke from a tiny plastic cup is no replacement for celebrating the day God brought the Christian Church into being. I did think about you, and I did say a quiet prayer of thanks to God for sending the Holy Spirit and calling to life the community of faith that is the Church.

The Day of Pentecost is a sacred anniversary for Christians, but our reading this morning reminds us that the work of the Holy Spirit is not confined to a single day. Yes, the Spirit gave birth to the Church but the story continues as the Holy Spirit empowers us, creating in us hearts of faith and connecting us to what God is doing in the world. It's fine to observe Pentecost Sunday but celebrating a day must not shift our attention from how the Holy Spirit gives birth in us to a way of life that is centered in God.

The Apostle Paul was a huge fan of the Holy Spirit. Paul taught that any capacity in us to trust God, any commitment we make to live for God, any action of goodness on our part that extends love to others - this is the work of the Spirit, shaping us for God's purposes. Paul describes this shaping of us as “life in the Spirit.” This is key. What Paul is talking about when he talks about the Spirit, what we focus on this morning, is a way of life. Now, when it comes to faith it's important to know what we believe. It's right to be clear about what we think regarding Christ, but Spirit life is not primarily what is in our minds. The Spirit impacts all of who we are and what we are. The way we live in the Spirit tells the story.

I mentioned our trip to England. As it turned out, we were in London the week of the royal wedding. Although the ceremony took place in Windsor, the city of London was buzzing in anticipation of the event. Harry and Meghan are just people like us, but the celebrity of royalty captivates our modern world. This country may have only a causal awareness of the royal family but being in Britain just days before the wedding educated us about the traditions and responsibilities of the queen and her heirs. As you would imagine, there are royal protocols when it comes to position and power. There is a clear hierarchy regarding the bestowing of royal titles, not to mention the wealth and power attached to them. To be among Britain's nobility is to receive the status the crown extends to all those in the family. This gives identity, not only to Elizabeth, who at 92 has reigned as queen for sixty-six years, but to her children and grandchildren. They are the family of the queen. What follows is an intense interest regarding the succession of the monarchy. Queen Elizabeth has lived a long time but she will not live forever. The line of those who could be king or queen someday is very much on the mind's of the people. Needless to say, a large portion of the world has been wrapped up in the drama. Harry and Meghan's wedding have clearly stirred our interest in the happenings of the royal family.

In the Book of Romans, Paul writes that there is a succession of power in the Christian family, too. The wonder of it is that all of us are in line to receive the blessing. This happens not because of some king or queen sitting on a throne in a wealthy laiden palace. We receive the blessing because we live within the reign of God. Jesus called it the Kingdom of God. This is the reality of God's rule in our lives. This is about the way we live. We live in God's realm whenever God's priorities and God's purpose and God's desires are at the center of our lives. In Britain's royal family the legacy is determined by who your parents are or who you marry. When it comes to Christ we are all children of God. In Christ, we are all claimed by love and we all have a place within the territory governed by God's eternal Spirit. This is the theme of the Apostle Paul's. His message is that the Spirit awakens us to the fact that we belong to God. The Spirit grants us access to God's saving work. We can count it. And so, if there is ever a time when we feel God has forgotten us, if there is ever a time when we wonder if God really cares about us, if there is some crisis in our faith and we doubt if the promises of God are really for us, the Spirit comes, giving

birth to a living faith, setting our feet on solid ground. Don't just take my word for it. The apostle leaves no doubt about it. We are given a life in the Spirit, and because of this there is nothing that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Romans 8:39)

All of this comes home when we read Paul's words, "we are children of God" and not only children, he writes we are "heirs of God," and not only heirs, says Paul, we are "joint heirs with Christ." (Romans 8:16-17) Let that sink in. We are "joint heirs with Christ." Harry and Meghan are heirs to a royal blessing that determines their place within their society. Good for them. I mean them no disrespect, but none of that matters in Christ. We and they, all of us, are joint heirs with Christ and this means that everything God has given to Jesus is given to us. The love that is in Jesus, the power to work for healing, the grace to forgive, the confidence to trust in God in the midst of all kinds of suffering, not to mention life that is stronger than all the darkness death would heap upon us, everything that belongs to Christ belongs to us. Sometimes it was hard for those who were in the early church. Sometimes they doubted the promises of their faith. There were moments when they questioned if they were positioned in the right way to receive God's blessing. Paul challenged their doubt. We are children of God, he insisted. In the midst of all that impacts us in this world we are claimed by God and we receive the promises of God. Let there never be doubt about this because the Spirit gives us life.

What, then, must we remember about what Paul teaches? It's all about how we live. The Spirit is constantly working to keep us connected to God. This is why Paul said we're given the Spirit so that we will not fall back into a life of fear. This is what we must remember as we live our lives this week. We are set free from fear. Ours is a life of faith not a life of fear. This is the final point for today. We have life in the Spirit, and this means we can live faithfully not fearfully. I leave you with this question. What will that look like for you this coming week? What difference will knowing you are loved by God, that you are a co-heir with Christ, make in the way you will live? One Christian author says it this way, "rather than being afraid – of the future, of what people may think of us, of our status, of our standing with God – Paul invites us to take hold of a life of courage." Ultimately this is what we've been given, courage to love God, to love one another, and to be in service to the world in Christ's name.

Church, stay firm in the faith this week. You are given live in the Spirit. One of the songs the church sings celebrates this truth, "On Christ the solid rock I stand all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand." Amen.