
Pentecost, Adoption, and a Boy Named Brody

A sermon by the Rev. Canon Julia Mitchener
The Day of Pentecost – Year C

Several years ago, a friend of mine and her husband adopted a baby. This was a long awaited, desperately wanted, child. My friend's social media posts in the week following her son's birth were magnificent to behold. Seeing pictures of her holding him, reading about the hours spent rocking, feeding, and soothing—all of this was incredibly heartwarming. Nothing though, compared with the moment my friend announced that she and her spouse were now officially their baby's parents. You see, ten days had had to pass before they could be sure the boy would be their son. Ten days! And then finally—finally—to hear that this child was truly theirs! At last, they could relax and enjoy the experiences most new parents take for granted. Suddenly, everything changed, and a spirit of unmitigated joy swept through the household. Even their infant son, it seemed, noticed the difference. Following his official adoption, he became less fretful, his mother said; he was easier to settle, took his bottle better, and slept for longer periods of time. It was as if he had been transformed, somehow, by having it declared who and whose he was.

Today is the Feast of Pentecost—that day in the Church Year when we are reminded who and whose we are. “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,” Paul writes in the epistle lesson assigned for this day, “but you have received a spirit of adoption.”^[1] You and I, like Christ's first followers, are the adopted children of God. Pentecost makes it official. In the words of the baptismal liturgy we will celebrate in just a few minutes, “[We] are sealed by the Holy Spirit . . . and marked as Christ's own forever.”

It is an adoption that changes everything. Witness this morning's reading from the Book of Acts, which tells the story of the first Pentecost. Jesus' disciples are all hanging out together after his ascension, when, all of a sudden, a holy hurricane blows through town and turns the whole place upside down. Tongues of fire rest on each of the disciples, and they begin speaking in languages they were never taught back at good 'ole Nazareth High. The disciples become apostles, people from throughout Jerusalem hear the Good News proclaimed in their native tongues, and the Church is born.

I'm struck by what a pivotal moment this is in the lives of Jesus' first followers. Before Pentecost, you see, there has always been the possibility of turning back, of going back to their hometowns, and getting back on their fathers' fishing boats. Of settling down with some nice girl, starting a family, and resuming an ordinary life. Of forgetting Jesus' strange and difficult teachings and retreating instead to that which is familiar and comfortable. But then the Holy Spirit blows in—then the Holy Spirit blows in, and everything changes. Those who have been wavering in their commitment are now swept up in a movement so powerful they cannot resist it. They can no longer deny who it is to whom they belong. Not only that, but the community as a whole is transformed. The many languages spoken by the people on that first Pentecost—the many languages that have previously prevented them from understanding one another—suddenly these are no longer an obstacle. The diversity that has always threatened the peace of Jerusalem, a barrier to people getting along—suddenly this diversity seems like a gift to be embraced rather than a threat to be eliminated.

Of course there are skeptics. There always are. Standing just to the side of all the action on that first Day of Pentecost is undoubtedly some important person, some ancient Palestinian influencer known for his common sense. This man sees his young son looking at one of the apostles with admiration, so he leans over and whispers in his ear: *Hey, wait a minute, buddy! I told you about that Matthias. Don't hang out with people like that. You come on home now, we've got chores to do before supper.*

There are skeptics whose response to Pentecost is simply to head home and get on with business as usual.

But there are also those who stay. There are also those who stay—three thousand of them, in fact. Luke tells us about them later on in the second chapter of Acts. There are three thousand people who, on that first Pentecost, receive the Holy Spirit, and are baptized and marked as Christ's own forever. People whose worlds are turned upside down by their adoption as God's children. People whose lives are changed irrevocably. No longer can these individuals pretend that those who look different from them and speak another language are anything but their own brothers and sisters. No longer can they live only for themselves, concerned merely for their own comfort, safety, and advancement. Rather, they are to lead lives of service and self-sacrifice, turning their swords into plowshares and embracing old enemies as friends.

As a result of all this, of course, many in the crowd think these Jesus Freaks are just that—freakish, a little off. Some they suppose, have been day drinking and are intoxicated. Their adoption by the Spirit makes them so strange, so different, that people don't know quite what to make of them.

Which raises an interesting question: What do people make of us? How do others view us latter day Christians on this Pentecost 2022, this feast on which we celebrate the relentless and undeterred manifestation of Life and Love even in a time during which many of us have witnessed more death and hate than we ever imagined possible. What do other people make of us? Do they see in us communities and individuals who have been so radically changed by an encounter with God that we, too, appear, by societal norms, to be a little "off," a little crazy? People who, in our ever more vengeful and polarized society, pursue peace and understanding, sometimes ill-advisedly? People who have been set on fire by the Spirit to live lives of hope and reconciliation even amidst a backdrop of growing isolation and despair? Is this what others see?

These are questions of critical importance, for as Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "The creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God."^[2] The creation waits with eager longing, in other words, for you and me to show exactly who and whose we are. People who aren't afraid to be different. People who actually view being different as part of our vocation. People who, in a culture that accepts ever increasing levels of violence, racism, and oppression, continue to strive for justice, freedom, and peace. People who, when others ignore or exploit the weak, the poor, the immigrant, or the stranger, speak out and say that this is wrong.

I read a story last week—maybe you saw it, too—about a lonely sixth grade boy named Brody, who, after being bullied most of the school year, felt devastated when only two of his classmates would sign his yearbook.^[3] Brody's mother posted in a parents' group about her son's sadness, hoping for even just a tiny bit of support. What happened next astonished her. The following day, a group of older kids from the school filed into the boy's classroom to autograph his yearbook. At first it was only a handful, but, soon, more and more came—seniors, juniors, sophomores, first year students. On and on it went until the book was completely filled. Kids wrote encouraging notes, some even including their phone numbers so that they could stay in touch over the summer. "It just swept through the school," one student noted of the mass expression of compassion and good will.

Now, I don't know if any of the youth involved in signing Brody's yearbook knew what big feast day was coming up on the Church calendar this week (I tend to doubt it). I don't know, and it doesn't really matter. What I do know is this: There was Pentecost in what those students did. There was Pentecost. There was a spirit of neighbor love that blew through that school as teens fluent in the language of what is "cool," what is "popular," what is "trending," suddenly spoke so that someone who embodied none of these things could hear words of welcome and acceptance. There was a spirit of adoption evident as they bucked social norms, welcoming this outsider into their fold, embracing where others had shunned. There was a spirit of change and transformation for all involved, including Brody's mother, who reflected, "It makes me feel like there's still hope, not just for Brody, but for humanity."

There was a spirit. There was a Spirit. May that Spirit be ours as well, even as we are the Spirit's, marked as Christ's own forever. Amen.

^[1] Romans 8: 15

^[2] Romans 8: 19

^[3] Cf. The Washington Post, "Classmates wouldn't sign his yearbook, so older students stepped in" and numerous other sources

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