

“Pentecost: The Spirit of the Future in the Present”

Acts 2:1-4; Romans 8:1-27

June 5, 2022

Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service

Pastor Nicoletti

The Reading of the Word

It is Pentecost Sunday – the day when we remember and reflect on the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on the Church.

Christ came. He died on the cross. He rose from the dead. After forty days he ascended to heaven, to the right hand of God the Father, and then, ten days after that, on Pentecost, he poured out the Holy Spirit on the Church.

Now, the Holy Spirit has always been at work among the people of God, and has always been active in the hearts and lives of believers. That did not start at Pentecost. At Pentecost, the Spirit was given to the Church in a special way to equip its mission to the world.

And so Pentecost is a time of year where we can consider both the worldwide mission of the Church that is equipped by the Holy Spirit, and also a time when we can reflect on the work of the Holy Spirit in general – even in ways that may not be unique to the redemptive historical events of Pentecost.

For our sermon this morning we’ll be doing more of the second. Our focus, prompted by Pentecost, will be to consider the ways that the Holy Spirit works in the hearts and lives of believers.

We will hear first, briefly, from Acts 2, and then a longer passage from Romans 8 – where I would especially encourage you to listen for what Paul has to say about the Holy Spirit.

With all that said, please do listen carefully, for this is God’s word for us this morning.

First, from Acts 2:

^{2:1} When the day of Pentecost arrived, they were all together in one place. ² And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³ And divided tongues as of fire appeared to them and rested on each one of them. ⁴ And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.

And then, in Romans 8, the Apostle Paul describes some of the ways that the Holy Spirit works in the lives of the people of God. We read:

^{8:1} There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ² For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. ³ For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. ⁵ For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. ⁶ For to set the

mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. ⁷ For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. ⁸ Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

⁹ You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. ¹⁰ But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. ¹¹ If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, "Abba! Father!" ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

¹⁸ For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. ¹⁹ For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. ²⁰ For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. ²⁴ For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

²⁶ Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. ²⁷ And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

"All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever." [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let's pray ...

Prayer of Illumination

Most merciful God,
We thank you that you have poured out your Spirit on us, your Church.
Holy Spirit, we ask you now to flood our hearts.
Revive our souls with your breath,
illuminate our minds with your light,
speak to us clearly, for you are the master of every language.
Grant then that we might truly hear your word,
be cut to the heart, believe your promises,

and put our hope in your work,
which we know is in perfect accord with the will of the Father,
and perfect unity with the work of the Son.
And it is in his name that we pray. Amen

Introduction

There is a lot going on in this passage. Obviously, we're not going to cover it all. Instead, our goal is to glean and to reflect on a few things that the Apostle Paul tells us here about the Holy Spirit and how he works in our lives.

And what we're going to focus on is one big-picture way that the Holy Spirit operates in us, and then, from there, three more specific ways that that plays out.

Big Picture: The Spirit of the Future

So first, let's consider one big-picture way that the Holy Spirit operates in us.

For this, we need to look to verse 23. There Paul writes that when we think of the future – of the future return of Christ, when he will come and make all things new, and all who trust in him will dwell in his presence forever, Paul says that in relation to that time, we “have the firstfruits of the Spirit.”

And that's an interesting statement, in a few ways.

First, it's interesting because of what the metaphor communicates on a basic level. The firstfruits were the first agricultural produce of a season. It was, John Stott explains, “both the beginning of the harvest and the pledge that the full harvest would follow in due time.” [Stott, 242]

The firstfruits of the harvest, in other words, was a good thing in itself, but it pointed forward to something greater – to the fullness of the harvest that was yet to come. And the firstfruits were something of a sign of what was to come.

So that's one image that Paul is evoking. But by saying that believers now have the “firstfruits of the Spirit,” it seems like he's also evoking another image. It seems like he's also intentionally pointing his audience back to the day that we are celebrating today.

Israel had an annual festival to celebrate the reaping of the firstfruits of the harvest. It was known as the “Feast of Weeks.” In Greek, it was called “Pentecost.” [Ferguson, 179]

It was on Pentecost – on Israel's festival of firstfruits – that Jesus poured out the Holy Spirit on the Church, as we read of in Acts 2. Now, it's likely that the concept of “firstfruits” has significance in more ways than one for the events that we read of in Acts 2. But Paul here seems to be drawing a connection to the fact that in receiving the Holy Spirit as we have, and as the Church did at Pentecost – we still have received just the firstfruits of what is to come.

The same idea is found in Ephesians, where we are told that the Holy Spirit is a “pledge” or a “guarantee” “of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.” [Ephesians 1:14; Ferguson, 177-178]

So, what is the truth that is being put before us in these metaphors?

Well, Reformed theologian Geerhardus Vos puts it like this – he writes that in these texts we are being told that: “The [Holy Spirit’s] proper sphere is the future aeon; from thence He projects Himself into the present, and becomes a prophecy of Himself in his eschatological operations.” [Vos, 165; also quoted in Ferguson, 178]

Now ... what on earth does that mean?

Well, Vos is saying that the Holy Spirit’s proper place is the future age when all things are made new. In fact, he goes on to explain that the Holy Spirit won’t just be the author of that future age, but he will be the permanent foundation of that future age. More than that, the Holy Spirit will be the very atmosphere in which we live, in that future age. And even more than that, the Holy Spirit will not just surround us, and not just hold us up, but he will saturate our very hearts in that future age. [Vos, 165]

That is what the fullness of the Holy Spirit – the great future harvest of the Holy Spirit – will look like.

Now, we have the firstfruits of the Spirit, as we read in verse twenty-three. It’s not the fullness. But it’s also not nothing. [Ferguson, 162]

As Sinclair Ferguson puts it: “For the Bible, the fullness of the Spirit belongs to the future age, not to the present.” [178] “Yet the work of the eschatological Spirit is not limited to the future. He invades the present [...] by his indwelling” God’s people [177]

The Holy Spirit, who belongs to the future age, has come, back in time (from our finite perspective) into the present, to work in our hearts and lives, and to point us forward – giving us a foretaste of what is to come.

The Spirit of the future age is at work in us now in the present. That is the big picture take-away that is crammed into that little phrase in verse 23.

That’s the big-picture thing we need to see: that the Holy Spirit is of the future age when all things will be made new by God, but now, as part of our redemption, he is at work in us as firstfruits in the present.

From there, Paul, in this chapter, highlights three ways that the Spirit of the future is at work in us in the present: he is at work in us to bring life instead of sin, he is at work to bring sonship rather than slavery, and he is at work to bring intercession rather than our own grasping at control.

Let’s now consider each of those ways the Spirit works in us.

I. The Spirit of Life

The first thing we see is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of life. He brings us life instead of sin.

In the first thirteen verses of Romans eight, the Apostle Paul contrasts the flesh with the Spirit. The way of the flesh leads to death. But the way of the Spirit leads to life.

Paul here is not just talking about physical life or physical death. And he's not contrasting the physical body with the non-physical Spirit.

Rather, the way of the flesh for Paul is the way of this present sinful age. And the way of the Spirit is the way of the Holy Spirit – the way of the age that is to come.

And at root, the way of the flesh is the way of Adam. It is the temptation to doubt God's word, and doubt God's love for us, and doubt God's goodness.

And it's a temptation that marks all of our lives. The world often shouts, and our hearts often whisper: That the Word of God to us in the Scripture isn't *really* true. That the God of the Bible doesn't *really* have our best in mind. That we *really* need to look out for ourselves ... don't we?

Those were the temptations of Adam. And those are temptations we give into whenever we sin. In every sin we are doubting God's word, and his love, and his goodness, and we are choosing to strike out on our own, apart from him. That is the way of Adam. That is the way of the flesh. It comes from the world, but it also comes from our own sinful hearts.

In the midst of such temptations from within and from without, what is our hope?

Our hope is the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of life, and the Spirit of righteousness. That is what Paul tells us here. Speaking to believers he writes in verse nine: "You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you." In verse eleven he writes: "If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."

Again, Paul is not drawing a contrast between the physical and the non-physical, but between the ways of Adam and this present age on the one hand, and the ways of the Holy Spirit and the future age on the other. [Ferguson, 154-155]

And Paul tells us that the Holy Spirit who will saturate the future age brings transformation even now – transforming those who trust in Christ, towards life and righteousness.

Now, again, the fullness of that transformation is not yet here. It belongs to the age that is to come. In the age to come the Holy Spirit will completely transform us. He will transform our bodies so that death has no power or even influence over them. And he will transform our souls so that sin has no power or even influence over them.

We do not yet experience the fullness of that transformation that will be brought by the Spirit. But we do have the firstfruits.

The Holy Spirit has come into the hearts of all who trust in Christ. And he has given us the firstfruits of that transformation. Though sin may remain present and influential in our hearts. The Holy Spirit has broken the reign and the dominion of sin in our hearts. [Ferguson, 168]

But the Holy Spirit's work was not a one-time thing. He continues to work. He continues to offer himself to us as the power by which we can fight sin in our hearts and in our lives. In fact that is what Paul is urging us towards in the first thirteen verses of Romans 8: to fight the sin in our hearts and lives by the power of the Holy Spirit. For in that fight we get a foretaste of true life – life that conquers the ways of sin which lead to death.

Where do you need to do that? Where do you need to turn to the presence of the Holy Spirit, and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, in your fight against sin – against the pattern of Adam in your heart and your life – the pattern of doubting God's word, and doubting God's goodness, and seeking your own ways? In what area of your life do you need to seek to do what God calls us to do, in reliance on the Holy Spirit?

And just to be clear: This is not some sort of vague mystical approach to fighting against our sin. In many ways it simply involves praying for the Spirit's aid in the face of our sin, and then boldly fighting our sinful temptations with confidence. But with a confidence that is not rooted in ourselves: in our own strengths and abilities. It is instead a confidence rooted in the Spirit. It is when we walk with a persistent reliance on the Holy Spirit – meaning that even when we fail, even when we sin, we get up and we try again, because we know the Spirit is with us, and so we know that while we ourselves may be weak, the Holy Spirit is strong, and he is in us. And he is the Spirit of Life. He is the Spirit of Righteousness. He is the Spirit of the age to come.

The age that is to come for the people of God is an age of holiness, love, and life. In the age to come we will walk in holiness and righteousness. And even now, the Holy Spirit is working to make that holiness and righteousness a present reality in our lives.

In the age to come, we will walk in perfect love. Heaven, Jonathan Edwards wrote, is “a world of ... love.” And even now, the Holy Spirit is working to make that love a present reality in our lives. [Ferguson, 179]

In ourselves, we falter. In ourselves we revert to the ways of this world – to the ways of the flesh ... to the ways of Adam.

But by the Holy Spirit we can have life – not just biological life, but the life of the age to come. By the Holy Spirit we can walk in holiness instead of in sin. By the Holy Spirit we can walk in the ways of love instead of the ways of selfishness.

The first way that the Spirit of the future operates in our present is that he enables us to walk in the love and holiness of the age to come, even now, in this sinful age. And we must seek his help in that.

That's the first way this dynamic plays out in our text.

II. The Spirit of Sonship

The second thing we see here is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Sonship. He gives us sonship instead of slavery.

And we read about that in verses 14-17 – Paul writes: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

And then, a few verses later, in verse 23, Paul writes that “we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

And what we see here is that in the work of applying our sonship, the Holy Spirit, again is taking his work in the future, and applying that future reality to the present.

The fullness of our sonship – our being children of God – is yet to come. It is something we will not experience completely until Christ returns and makes all things new. That is what Paul is saying in verse 23. He says that we groan inwardly because we wait eagerly for that day when our bodies will be made new, and our adoption as sons will be experienced in full. It is, in that sense, a future event.

And yet, it is applied to us by the Holy Spirit also in the present. The Spirit takes that future work, and makes it a present reality in our lives. That’s what we read of in verses 14 through 17. We have already experienced “the Spirit of adoption as sons” and “the Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

This is another work that the Holy Spirit will bring in its fullness in the future, but which he invades our present with, and makes a reality for us even now.

The language in verse seventeen of being “heirs” prepared to receive an inheritance reinforces that dynamic.

Paul is evoking a picture in which we receive some of the benefits of being sons now, but the fullness of our inheritance is yet to come.

But in our case with God, the inheritance is not primarily monetary or material – but it is focused on our relationship with God himself, and our experience of him as our Father.

That is the future blessing we look to. But it’s also what we can have now, in the present, because of the Holy Spirit. And yet we don’t always acknowledge it. And Paul makes that point by drawing a contrast.

The contrast is that sometimes we relate to God like slaves, rather than like sons. That’s the point Paul makes in verse fifteen.

We can sometimes tend to relate to God like slaves. We think of him as our Master, and ourselves as his servants. Now, that language is not in itself wrong. But it is wildly incomplete. Because Paul tells us, we are also sons. And it is the Holy Spirit who helps us believe and experience that even now. Because we read in verse sixteen, the Holy Spirit, “bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.”

Now ... I think that when we tend to think about that – when we think about the Holy Spirit testifying to our own hearts that we are beloved children of God, we tend to imagine it happening in really positive and encouraging moments.

We think of a powerful and beautiful hymn swelling on Sunday morning, and as we sing, we have the assurance in our hearts, that God is indeed our Father, and we are indeed his children. Or we think of walking in a beautiful part of nature – of God’s creation – and taking a deep breath, and knowing in our hearts that God loves us like a Father.

And the Holy Spirit *does* work in those ways. Many of you have had experiences like that, and it is a wonderful thing – a blessing of the Holy Spirit.

But that’s not the kind of thing that Paul has primarily in view here, in this passage.

In verse fifteen, Paul writes: “but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Sinclair Ferguson, reflecting on this verse, writes this – he says: “This astonishing use of child-language [for ‘Father’] is so remarkable that it has sometimes obscured the force of Paul’s teaching; for the verb he uses [for] ‘cry’ [...], is powerfully onomatopoeic [...] and indicates the presence of intense feeling. It is used in the Septuagint of loud cries and intense emotions [...] and similarly in the New Testament of the screaming of the Garasene demoniac, the shrieks of the spirit who possessed the epileptic boy, the cries of blind Bartimaeus and the cry of Jesus on the cross.” From that, Ferguson draws the conclusion that “The atmosphere [being described by Paul in this verse] is not [one of] tranquility but crisis.” [Ferguson, 183]

In other words, Paul’s emphasis here, when he speaks about crying out to God as our Father, is not on how you relate to God in moments of warmth and encouragement. It’s on how you relate to God in moments of crisis and distress.

So how do you relate to God in moments of crisis and distress?

Do you, in those moments, tend to fall into thinking of God as an uncaring Master, and yourself as an uncared-for slave? When things are difficult, when life confounds you, when you feel despair – is that how you begin to think of your relationship to God?

It is for such moments that you have been given the Holy Spirit of the future, right now in the present. Because if you have trusted in Christ, then you have been welcomed into his family as a child of God. It is the Spirit who will one day in the future transform your heart and your body so that you will fully experience your sonship. But even now, the Spirit testifies to you that you are God’s beloved child. Even now, the Spirit helps you call out to God as your Father.

And so in those moments of crisis – in those moments when you doubt God’s care for you – ask the Holy Spirit to testify to you. Ask the Holy Spirit to bear witness in your heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you cry out to God as your Father in your desperation. For that is why the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of sonship – has been given to you.

Sinclair Ferguson writes: “What Paul is saying [here], is that even in the darkest hour there is a co-operative and affirmative testimony given by the [Holy] Spirit. It is found in the very fact that, although he may be broken and bruised, tossed about with fears and doubts, the child of God nevertheless in his need cries out, ‘Father!’ as instinctively as a child who has fallen and been hurt calls out in similar language, ‘Daddy, help me!’ Assurance of sonship is not reserved for the highly sanctified Christian; it is the birthright of even the weakest and most oppressed believer.” [Ferguson, 184-185]

The second way that the Spirit of the future operates in our present is that he enables us to call out to God as our Father, and to know that we are his children, even now, in this age of suffering and of pain.

III. The Spirit of Intercession

The third thing we see here is that the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Intercession. He helps intercede for us rather than calling us to control things.

When trouble comes, we often grasp at control. We want to understand the situation. We want to figure out a solution. And we want to implement a fix.

And for some situations in life that is a very good approach.

But for others, if we’re honest, we quickly meet our match.

Because other times, we cannot understand the situation we are in. We cannot figure out a solution. We cannot carry out a fix.

In such moments we often struggle. Sometimes we grasp at any possible solution, throwing different fixes at the situation whether they make sense or not. Other times we obsess about the situation, trying to find the right angle that will help us grasp at control. Still other times we frantically search for a solution, convinced that it must be out there, that we can find it, and that then we can fix everything.

We can do this with all sorts of challenges in our lives: with our children, with our jobs, with our own hearts, with our finances, with our relationships, with so many details of our lives.

Where do you tend to do that? Where do you see those patterns emerging in your heart or in your life?

Now, again, in each of these areas of life there is a place for trying to understand, trying to solve, and trying to fix. And there are many things that can be handled in that way.

But there are many others that can't. And that is where we so often go wrong.

In fact, in those moments, even our prayers can become kind of controlling, can't they? We can find ourselves thinking that for our prayers to really be effective, we really need to know the right thing to pray for, the right thing to ask for – we need to get the details right, so that we can ask God to do the right thing.

And praying for details, again, can be fine – it can be good. But sometimes our focus on detail really just grows out of a desperate desire to control things.

But what about when we can't? What about when we can't control our situation, or understand our problems, or find a solution, or apply the right fix? What about when we are weak? What then?

The Apostle Paul tells us in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven: “The Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

This too is the Spirit's work of the future in the present. In the future – in the New Heavens and the New Earth, our communion and communication with God will be perfect. But the Spirit gives us the gift of that communication – the gift of that intercession – even now, in the present. Though our sinful hearts may struggle with it, and our fallen minds may be unable to grasp it, and our limited vision may keep us from seeing it clearly, even so, in those very moments, the Holy Spirit “himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words [...] because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.”

Sinclair Ferguson puts it like this – he writes that in verses twenty-six and twenty-seven of our text:

“The believer is portrayed as subject to such weakness that coherent petition is impossible. Prayer becomes but a groan. But this groan is an indication of the presence and ministry of the [Holy] Spirit. [...] The element of heart-frustration and inexpressible emotion in what Paul says [describes this] incoherence. This is a portrayal of the absolute and total weakness of the believer, a weakness too weak to express his or her need coherently.

“The grace of the Spirit's ministry is that even when Christians are too weak to formulate prayer, he effects the Father's determination to gather his children into his arms and engage them in his purposes. On such occasions, the inexpressible groans of intercession are akin to the grunts or groans of those whose cerebral abilities have been impaired, yet which are marvelously interpreted by their loved ones.” [189]

In such moments, no one else may be able to understand your expressions of distress. No one else might “get it.” But God “gets it.” God understands what is going on in your heart. God, through the intercession of the Holy Spirit, knows what you need, even when you don't know how to say it.

When life overwhelms you, when you don't know what to do or to say or even what to pray for, you must remember that you have the Holy Spirit – the Spirit of Intercession. Come before God even if you don't know what to say. Groan, or cry, or just sit silently before the Lord, and ask the

Spirit to help you. Ask the Spirit to intercede for you. Because that is why he has been given to you.

The third way that the Spirit of the future operates in our present is that he intercedes for us with God as our Father when we are confounded and in distress.

Conclusion

In the gospel, God has promised us a great future. We have a wonderful inheritance to look forward to in the age to come.

But God has not left us alone in this age. He has poured out his Holy Spirit upon us – the Spirit of the future, given in this present age. And by the Spirit we can grow in holiness. By the Spirit we can know that we are children of God. By the Spirit we can cry out to God even when we lack words to speak.

And so, brothers and sisters, let us give thanks for the gift of the Spirit. And let us call out to him, asking him to be at work in us in all these ways.

Amen.

This sermon draws on material from:

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