

## **“Clothed in a Spirit of Adoption”**

*Sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

### **Pentecost**

*May 23, 2010*

*Romans 8:12-17, John 14:15-17, 25:27*

Our first scripture text is a small piece from the eighth chapter of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans. A number of scholars believe that Paul, in the first eight chapters of Romans, is outlining his theology - what he believes about God and how God works in the world, in advance of coming to Rome. It is kind of like his faith statement. One of the most important ideas in Paul’s faith statement is that God’s gracious love is poured out on both Jews and non-Jews, that being a child of God is not tied to the circumstances of one’s birth (one’s race, ethnic background, religious upbringing, or social class) but is a result of the work of God and God’s Spirit. It is a gift of grace, not something we earn or deserve. Listen for what Paul says about that Spirit and how it leads us to understand ourselves as God’s beloved children, children who are led by love and not fear. And when he writes that as children, we are heirs with Christ, consider that part of what we inherit with him is the work of making the world new in the name of love.

Our second scripture lesson is from John’s Gospel. It is a portion of Jesus’ farewell speech to the disciples in the upper room on the night before he is arrested and crucified. Listen for what Jesus tells them about the Holy Spirit, whom he calls the Advocate (the Paraclete - from *parakaleo*, to walk beside - and it was used to describe those who served as advocates in a courtroom setting). Notice what Jesus says about this Spirit of truth - how it is with them and will be IN them. Notice what Jesus says the Spirit will do in and for them. And pay particular attention to what Jesus says about anxiety and fear. *Read John here.*

“*Pentecost*” is perhaps my favorite Sunday of the church year, though it is hard to top Easter. The crowds are bigger at Easter, of course (although this a pretty nice looking crowd). As a preacher I can tell you there is nothing quite like the feeling of preaching the message of resurrection - the central message of our faith, Christ’s triumph over death, to a packed house. What a kick it was this year, in between the first and second services to behold a long line of people, stretching out to the parking lot, weaving its way past our lovely blooming cross bedecked with flowers as they came into the sanctuary.

It’s not just the crowds at Easter. The music is always glorious. Brian and the choir, consistently excellent the rest of the year, seem to soar to even higher levels on Easter, and the sounding brass and the booming timpani combine with them to stir our souls. The lilies on the chancel and the brand new Easter dresses, hats, and suits make the sanctuary come alive in a sea of spring colors, white and pink, light green and lavender and yellow. It’s hard to top Easter.

But for me, Pentecost does that. Oh, the crowds are not typically as big - though we often have a nice turnout of family and friends for the confirmation service as we do this morning. We may not have

brass and timpani like we do at Easter, although it's nice to have the maracas this morning. The beautiful lilies and flowery pastel Easter dresses give way to color that is not soothing but more "in your face"-- banners of red flame, red candles on wrought iron candelabra, and, if people remembered it was Pentecost, red clothing - red ties, red blouses and dresses. I know of at least one person, Rev. Dan Thomas, who is wearing red socks.

Do you know why I love Pentecost so much? Because unlike the other two big holidays of the church year, Easter and Christmas, this is a day on which we celebrate not just God's commitment to us, but our commitment to God. This is a day when we celebrate, being on fire for God, passionately doing the work God has given us to do.

On Christmas we celebrate the incarnation, when God came and dwelt among us in human likeness in the form of a vulnerable baby in Jesus. On Easter we celebrate that when that baby became a man, he was willing to suffer persecution and death at the hands of the religious and political authorities of his day for challenging the status quo of exclusion and injustice. And we celebrate not just that he died, but that he rose again. In a way we can't completely understand or wrap our minds around, death was not the end for Jesus or for his message, so we no longer need to fear death. But Pentecost tells us that the Spirit that was at work in Jesus, the Spirit that enabled him to flesh out the presence of God in the world, and enabled him to triumph over sin, death and evil at Easter - well, that Spirit is and can be at work in us. Even us "frozen chosen" Presbyterians. On Pentecost, we remember that the light that was in Christ is also in us, the work of embodying love that Christ was about is also our work, and the Spirit that emboldened him to teach and preach and care and heal, even in the face of opposition, is the same Spirit that can embolden us.

At 9:00, when we had a smaller crowd, we had a Moment for Young Disciples. As a part of that Moment for Young Disciples, I talked about my stole. I told the children that this stole is a way of reminding me and the people in this congregation that God has given me special work to do: God has called me and empowered me to speak the word of God, to communicate God's message to people. So we talked about what a stole is. And then I handed out small red stoles to each of the kids for them to wear. And I said, *"All of you also have been given important work to do by God. God has called you, whether or not you are ever a preacher or a pastor, whether or not you are ever ordained, God has called you to proclaim God's message, to share God's good news through what you say and through what you do - the way you live and act in the world."*

You confirmands might remember a little term we use for that in the Reformed Tradition. We call it the priesthood of how many believers? *All believers*. How many? *All believers*...whether or not you ever get a chance to wear a stole.

Paul calls the Spirit that was given to the disciples - and to us - a Spirit of adoption, and not a spirit of slavery. Now to understand what he means by that, think first of what it means to be enslaved to something. It means to be in bondage, to somehow not be free. When Paul writes of the spirit of slavery, he is talking about the sense that we are bound to do this or that, that we are somehow trapped, that we are not free. People who suffer with addictions know about a spirit of slavery. You are always looking for the

next hit, the next high, the next purchase, the next conquest, the next drink. Those things begin to control your life.

It's not just addictions that can enslave us, more than that, it is fear and anxiety. We can become slaves to our fears. This week I was in Nashville, Tennessee for a preaching conference. One of the wonderful things about these conferences is that we can have as many as fifteen to eighteen hundred other preachers in attendance. Now that might sound like your idea of a nightmare, I understand. But we are all gathered there and before it is through we get to listen to twenty or more different sermons. They call it "The Festival of Homiletics."

One thing I notice when I am at such conferences is that, though I may appear to you to be an extrovert, I am not really an extrovert. Here is how I know this. When I go to a conference like that and there are 1500 other pastors, I am not running around meeting all kinds of new people. No, because I am not in my role as a pastor. I am timid, and reserved, and waiting for people to come up to me. I am just hoping that someone will come over to me, hoping that I will see somebody I know. Usually, I find somebody I know. But if I don't, I'm just kind of there thinking, "Uhh... Everybody has their own group of friends." Do you know what that is? It's fear.

When I am at these conferences I need my own little Pentecost. On the plane home, I finally had one. I met several different pastors who were flying back to Dulles, too. I was able to just chat with them about what the conference was like for each of us. We formed a little community. And I initiated the conversation. I took me a week to get up the courage to do so!

We can be slaves to our fears. Not just our fears about reaching out to other people, but fears about money, or about what other people's opinion of us. Fear of failure, fear of success. All sorts of things to which we can be enslaved, all kinds of things which can bind us....

In contrast to the spirit of slavery, and writing to people who knew and know what it is to let fears dictate our lives, Paul says we are given a spirit of adoption. A few weeks ago, I mentioned my former parishioners Christal and Patric, who prayed and prayed unsuccessfully to have a biological child of their own. I mentioned that they have become foster parents to a little boy his name is Scott, and now a baby girl, Autumn. These two children are extremely lucky to be with Patric and Christal. I know that more than anything, what Patric and Christal want to do is to adopt those children. Those kids are wanted.

When we talk about a spirit of adoption, we are talking about having the sense that we are wanted, valuable and loved by God. If you didn't get anything else out of the confirmation process, confirmands, if you understood that, that is good. Hopefully that will take you to the next level, which is, if I am that loved, what can I do to make a difference in the name of love.

To have a spirit of adoption is to recognize that we are wanted. That the God we know in Jesus Christ loves us and calls us children. Now to have that Spirit of adoption doesn't mean that life will always be easy, however. It certainly didn't mean that for Jesus.

I remember, in a previous congregation, receiving some criticism for something I said in a sermon. Interestingly, I can't remember what it is that I said, just the fact that I received criticism. I shared my dismay at the criticism with a mentor of mine. He asked me, "Well, did you say what you thought the God we know in Christ Jesus would have wanted you to say?" I told him, "yes". He replied, "Well, then I can see why you are upset at the fact that it wasn't universally hailed as the best idea since sliced bread. After all, *everything* Jesus said and did was met with great acclaim and positive feedback from everyone he encountered. You could see that most clearly on Good Friday, couldn't you Aaron." That made me think.

To have a spirit of adoption doesn't mean we won't encounter opposition, trouble or hardship in life. In fact, I'm not sure how anyone can read the New Testament and think that a life of following Jesus is going to be easy all the time. What a spirit of adoption can guarantee is that we will not be alone as we face those challenges.

Several weeks ago, about forty of us were down in Harrisonburg for a retreat at Massanetta Springs Conference Center. Our focus for that weekend was the fruit of the Spirit - love, joy, peace, patience...you know the list. When we came to the end of our time together, we had a worship service. It was outside, under a pavilion. In good Presbyterian fashion we had a printed order of worship with lots of words on it because, after all, we are Presbyterians, so when we have worship we need lots of words and they need to be printed on paper. So, at a certain point in the service, somebody said to me, "Aaron, do you think we could have a laying on of hands for Mark Fowler. You know, tomorrow, Eric is facing his sentencing. (Eric is his son, who did in fact face sentencing the next day for his role in a tragic car accident that took the life of a fellow college student). I said, "Sure, sure, we can do that."

After my brief meditation, (not a sermon, just a thought), I called everyone there to come forward and I said, "We are going to lay hands on Mark Fowler now." Everybody came up, from the youngest little Cassandra Gore, to the oldest, Flynn Bucy's eighty year old father. We gathered around Mark, we put our hands on him, and we prayed. Vance Gore told me that he was most moved to see his young son Atticus with his hand on Mark's back. We prayed. We prayed that the judge would have mercy, we prayed that God would be with the Schlifke family, with the Fowler family, and with Eric. But most importantly, we prayed that no matter what happened, God would take care of everyone involved. All of us, ordained and unordained, young and old, whether we were wearing a stole or not, gathered together and prayed. That prayer didn't prevent Eric from receiving a very stiff sentence. In fact, it was more stiff than any of us would have liked. But it did mean that we were entrusting that whole unfortunate situation into God's hands because we were children of God.

As teenager Melba Patillo was one of nine black students who enrolled in Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. She did so amidst protests from the governor and much of the white community in Little Rock. The confrontation grew, until finally President Dwight Eisenhower ordered thousands of federal troops and the National Guard to surround the school and ensure the safety of those nine brave African-American students. Those students were in 9<sup>th</sup> grade, *confirmands*.

Several years ago Melba Patillo Beals was interviewed and asked about how she had the courage to walk through a sea of snarling protestors to get to school. This is part of what she said:

*I felt that if what my parents said was correct - that God loved me equally with all the white people - then I deserved to have what everybody else had. I deserved to go to whatever school I chose. I trusted 100% that God would take care of me, because I was doing the right thing. Therefore, God was my courage.<sup>i</sup>*

Now we need to acknowledge that there were plenty of people in the Civil Rights Movement for whom God was their courage who faced beatings and imprisonment and were even killed. But nevertheless, they were courageous.

Melba said this of her courage:

*My grandmother India - who had been a maid - thought that my integrating Central was a way of assuring that I wouldn't be a maid too. It was a way of demanding that I would be treated equally and have equal opportunity, a life that she never had. So she would talk to me and say that I was chosen to perform this task by God, and if I denied that I had to do it - if I did not comply - then I would suffer in many ways...in my own heart, and in my belief in God. These beliefs were a central part of my upbringing.<sup>ii</sup>*

When she was asked, "Did you ever think of quitting school," she replied:

*Every moment of every day. If someone called me names or spat on me, or kicked me in the shin, or walked on my heel, I thought I couldn't make it one more moment. But each time I would go home, and my grandmother would point out that what I was doing was not for myself, but for generations yet unborn. She would tell me that I would be OK, and turn me right around and send me back. She would also inspire me, explain to me why I would want to go back.<sup>iii</sup>*

She never quit. She just kept going. And she received an education.

Most of us are way more privileged than Melba Patillo was, but we are no less called by God to make a difference in the name of love. We have been called, each and every one of us, and gifted with the Spirit. The challenge, the question for us every day, is whether or not we will respond to that calling.

And remember this: *You don't need to wear a stole to do it.*

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>i</sup> The interview/live chat with Melba Patillo Beals took place on January 31, 1995. I am quoting from the transcript of that interview found on scholastic.com. You can read the whole interview here: <http://www2.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=4799>

<sup>ii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.