

CHILD-LIKE WAYS

a sermon by

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Text: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." (Romans 8:14)

This morning I am honored to welcome all who visit with us at this First Presbyterian Church. It is that time of year when a variety of events come to a point at the same time. This morning we celebrate the occasion of Pentecost (the birthday of the church, the moment that God's people were able to speak in such a way that the nations around them could hear and understand.) We celebrate also Memorial Day, that bittersweet observance that recognizes both the joy of our freedoms and the bloodletting that has bought them. Our congregation on this day also commissions and sends a Mission team, a group of individuals with a wide variety of skills, talents and backgrounds. We have commissioned you to go forth in the name of this church, and as such to go forth in the name of Jesus Christ, and to practice your skills, including the medical arts, construction work, and even acts of kindness.

From the perspective of the casual observer, it may seem that these events are so disparate that they cannot be held together. And yet I will tell you that these disparate events are woven and held together in a common fabric. The occasion of Pentecost, the celebration of Memorial Day, and the commissioning of a mission team all involve individuals being sent in the name of God.

I.

As a Presbyterian church we are part of a denomination and of the Reformed Tradition that precede us by many years. It is easy for us to forget that ours was not always a tradition that was unified. There was a time when the theological convictions, the character of our congregations, even the success of the reformed tradition were unanswered questions.

The reformed tradition is regarded as having begun when Martin Luther posted his "Ninety-Five Theses" at the castle chapel in Wittenberg, Germany on October 31, 1517. In this document, Martin Luther listed a variety of complaints, including some against ecclesiastical practices. From that moment, there began a series of differences that would distinguish Lutherans from Roman Catholics. Martin Luther himself participated in an attempt to resolve these differences with the Augsburg Confession of Faith in 1530.

Apart from the German Lutheran tradition, there was also a reformation beginning in Switzerland. Huldreich Zwingli, who opposed the sale of indulgences, was among the early leaders of the Swiss Reformation. He was followed by John Calvin, an attorney and French Protestant who fled to Geneva.

The German, Lutheran, and Swiss reformed tradition followed along the river ways until they met necessarily and clashed in Heidelberg.

This clash was fueled by intensely different perspectives on the sacrament of communion. For Martin Luther, the words "this is my body," spoke of God's omnipresence and, therefore, Christ's physical body being everywhere at once, even within the bread. When Zwingli spoke those same words, he believed that Christ was using a figure of speech. To Zwingli, Jesus was, in fact, present when those words were spoken to the disciples; but that the Bible teaches that the resurrected body of Jesus is in heaven and a physical body can be in only one place at a time.

John Calvin would eventually offer the prevailing argument; that both Luther's "physical presence" and Zwingli's "symbolic act" are wrong. Calvin argued that Jesus Christ is present in the bread, but the presence is spiritual, not physical.

As this particular debate unfolded throughout the Protestant Reformation, there was an unavoidable tension within certain communities. The town of Heidelberg represented the meeting place of the Lutheran and Calvinist movements.

The theological debate erupted in a bitter feud in 1559. In a worship service that included both a Lutheran and a Calvinist minister, the conflict came to a breaking point. The story is told that the younger Calvinist priest stood before the community, held the bread about his head and spoke the words, "this is my body." So enraged was the much older Lutheran minister, that he lunged towards and tackled the other pastor. They literally wrestled and fought over the possession of the Communion cup in front of the congregation.

The regional governor attempted to resolve the debate by requesting the writing of a catechism, a series of questions and answers. The Heidelberg catechism was then written by a theology professor, Zacharias Ursinus, and by a local pastor, Kaspar Oevianus, and was published in 1563.

The Heidelberg catechism is structured in such a way that it acknowledges the realities of sin, redemption and thankfulness. This outline comes from a text excerpted from the New Testament book of Romans. "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Romans 7:24-25a)

Some of the questions and their answers may be familiar to you.

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong -- body and soul, in life and in death -- not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation. Therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.

Q.2 How many things must you know that you may live and die in the blessedness of this comfort?

A. Three. First, the greatness of my sin and wretchedness. Second, how I am freed from all my sins and their wretched consequences. Third, what gratitude I owe to God for such redemption.

Our Reformed Tradition was not always unified; but, our God was never divided.

II.

Sin, redemption and thankfulness are inseparable from our Reformed Tradition. This element of thankfulness is revealed in the "gratitude I owe to God for such redemption" and has marked and shaped our reformed tradition in such a way that we are set apart from most any other faith tradition. It is not enough to acknowledge that we are sinners and that our salvation comes only from the grace of God. Because of God's saving grace, we must respond with good works.

Q. 86. Since we are redeemed from our sin and its wretched consequences by grace through Christ without any merit of our own, why must we do good works?

A. Because just as Christ has redeemed us with his blood he also renews us through his Holy Spirit according to his own image, so that with our whole life we may show ourselves grateful to God for his goodness and that he may be glorified through us; and further, so that we ourselves may be assured of our faith by its fruits and by our reverent behavior may win our neighbors to Christ.

The inseparable elements of sin, redemption and thankfulness have shaped and defined our Reformed Tradition. We perform good works, not in the hopes or with any idea that such works will allow us to enter into the presence of God. Instead, we perform good works as an act of gratitude to God.

Some years ago I was privileged to attend a lecture by Dr. Tom Hanchett, an historian with North Carolina's Levine Museum of The New South. Among the questions that followed the lecture was an inquiry into historic events and elements unique to North Carolina.

Dr. Hanchett spoke of the role of the Presbyterian settlers. He commented that when many of the villages and towns were established by Roman Catholic missionaries, schools were opened to train individuals for work in the priesthood. In contrast, when the French Presbyterians arrived (Huguenots), they opened schools in every community. The Presbyterians believed that every child must be taught to read. By learning to read, every individual would have an opportunity to read the Bible; each individual would have an opportunity to choose for himself or herself as to whether or not they would follow our God. Dr. Hanchett went on to say that those Presbyterian-established schools eventually became North Carolina's public school system.

Throughout our history and throughout these United States, Presbyterians have worked in the name of God and for the benefit of our larger community. Public schools and community hospitals are, historically and presently, important parts of our work. So, it is only fitting, that we would send a diverse group of peoples to the country of Nicaragua to do important work for a village that itself includes a diverse group of people.

Ginger Rogers is quoted as saying, "When two people love each other, they don't look at each other, they look in the same direction."¹ Perhaps it can also be said, when you find that you are loved by God, you don't look towards yourself; rather, you look towards God and the direction that He would have you travel.

When we find ourselves looking towards God, we may find ourselves participating in work that defies explanation. A story such as this is told of Michelangelo and one of his common workers.

"Michelangelo was once assisted in his work by a marble-hewer, who, by following Michelangelo's detailed instructions – 'cut this away... level that... polish here' -- was amazed to find that he had created a splendid marble figure. 'What do you think of that?' asked Michelangelo. 'I think it's fine,' replied the man, 'and I am much obliged to you. By your means I have discovered a talent that I did not know I possessed.'"²

When two people find that they are loved by God, they don't look towards each other, they look towards God. As you look towards God, as you go to those places where God shall send you, you may discover talents that you did not know that you possess.

¹ Quoted by Dotson Rader "I Don't Want to Live Without Love" *Parade* March 8, 1987.

² Clifton Fadiman, editor. The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985), page 400.

III.

This relationship between sin, redemption and thankfulness is woven throughout the New Testament book of Romans. The apostle Paul is writing to a Christian community that he has known from its very beginning. Paul is extremely concerned that people learn and live the distinction between God's law and God's grace. Because we are sinners, we will not ever measure correctly to the standards set forth in God's law. Because of God's grace, we are redeemed from our sinfulness.

"There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death."
(Romans 8:1-2)

Having been set free from the law of sin and death, how then are we to respond?

In answering this question, the apostle Paul gives to us the image that we are to move in a new direction, a direction that will take us towards our God and away from this world. Our new state is described to us as debtors, as individuals who are under a specific obligation, but not to the flesh of this world, "to live according to the flesh."

This new direction is not one of our own choosing. This direction requires that we be led by the Spirit of God.

"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God..." (Romans 8:14-16, NRSV)

In our Reformed Tradition, these acts -- of God's leading and of our following -- are understood as the work of God's Holy Spirit. On this day of Pentecost we celebrate that it is God's Holy Spirit that gives breath and voice to the church. The event of Pentecost was an important celebration in first century Judaism. "Jewish tradition held that the law was given on this day, seven weeks after Passover."³

As part of the celebration, people traveled to Jerusalem from all over the known world. Every imaginable language could be heard as it was spoken in the streets. The surviving disciples of Jesus had gathered and were all together in one place.

"And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability."

³ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, editors. The New Oxford Annotated Bible (New York: Oxford University press, 1965, 1977) page 1320.

"Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?'" (Acts 2:2-7, NRSV)

The miracle of Pentecost is not only the miracle of God's Holy Spirit speaking through the people of God. The miracle of Pentecost is also the miracle of the nation's newfound gift of hearing and understanding what is being spoken.

The world is described as being "amazed and astonished" at this event; even asking, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" That particular question is very telling. "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?"

Several of my friends, particularly ministers from other countries and missionaries serving across the world, have repeated this joke in various forms. When someone speaks three languages, we call that person "trilingual." When someone speaks two different languages, we call that person "bilingual." When someone speaks only one language, we call that person "an American."

Then, as now, the world is often amazed and astonished when witnessing the work being done through the people of God. We ourselves may even be amazed and astonished at the work that God can do through us. And yet, God continues to do this work.

Sin, redemption and thankfulness are inseparable from our faith proclaimed by our Reformed Tradition. We are sinners in the sight of God, unable to do any good works that will save ourselves from our sinfulness. We are redeemed, purchased from our sinfulness, by the grace of our God. To respond correctly, we are to act with thankfulness towards God's gift, a gift of great value which is given freely.

All too often we want to control God's ability to do work in and through our lives. We want to know -- and to know now -- what talents we possess; and, from those we want to choose which talents we shall be called to use. However, no matter how much we may wish to control this, such authority belongs only to God. There is an irreconcilable difference between matters of this world and matters of God. When we seek to possess inappropriate control of our lives, we are taking authority that belongs rightly and only to God.

This morning I am truly honored to welcome all who visit with us at First Presbyterian Church. This congregation is part of a denomination in a faith tradition that serves in the name of our God and for the benefit of others around us. I invite you, each and every one of you, that you may join us in this tradition of service. Even if you do not join us in our profession of faith, we acknowledge that God has gifted you with certain skills and talents and with many opportunities to work and to serve.