

Sermon May 26, 2024
[Isaiah 6:1-8; Romans 8:12-17; John 3:1-17]

What Makes Us Children of God?
Pastor Dan Peterson

Grace to you, and peace, from God, the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

The title of today's message, you may recall, is "What Makes Us Children of God?"

Some of you recognize the name Jesse Pflueger. Pastor Jesse Pflueger founded Queen Anne Lutheran church back in 1918, and after serving here for close to two decades, he went to what was then called Pacific Lutheran College, which is now called Pacific Lutheran University. Some of you may also know that two of his descendants are seated among you this morning: Dick Pflueger, his grandson, and Connie Wurm, his great niece. We are delighted to have the Pflueger presence continue among us.

Some of you, finally, may also know that before I came to Queen Anne Lutheran Church, I taught at Pacific Lutheran University – the reverse pattern of Jesse Pflueger's story. You may also recall a story I've shared before, about a class I was teaching, when I first started at PLU, at a local church. At the end of this class, there was a woman who raised her hand. She and her husband graduated from PLU in 1955, and she said to me, "You know, you remind me a lot of Professor Pflueger!" But then she added, "Only, you ask too many questions!"

That's true. I'm always asking questions, and I have several of them for you today. My first question: Why were the readings we heard from Isaiah, Romans and the Gospel of John, chosen for today?

After all, Isaiah, much like every other book in the Old Testament, never explicitly refers to the Trinity. That's a *Christian* doctrine that would develop long after the canon of the Old Testament had been closed. John, on the other hand, focuses primarily on the story of Jesus's communication with Nicodemus, talking about being "born from above," or, as we say in popular Christian parlance today, "born again." Finally, Romans offers nothing but confusing talk regarding "debtors" and what it means to "live in the Spirit." (It's no wonder that Paul, according to a later reading of the New Testament, was "hard to understand;" we have direct proof of it in today's second reading!)

Fortunately, there is an easy answer to the question of why today's readings were chosen by the editors of the Common Lectionary. Each of these readings contains a Trinitarian pattern for God-talk.

In Isaiah, for example, we have the triad: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts. The whole earth is full of his glory." When I read a passage like this, I think to myself, "stop looking up to find God. The presence of God is in, with, and under all things." It reminds me of Ephesians 4, which I often mention before Holy Communion.

When it comes to the Gospel of John, we hear language of "God, the Son and the Spirit," – once again, a Trinitarian pattern. Whenever we find language like this of God, "Jesus and the Spirit" often pop up in the New Testament. That pattern was so important to early Christianity that it became the basis for the later doctrine of the Trinity.

In Romans, finally, we have Paul talk about "Abba," which is a diminutive in Aramaic. It literally means "Daddy." So, it's an intimate or informal way of speaking to God. In

Romans, he says “Abba,” or father, and he says “Christ,” and he, of course, speaks of “the Spirit.” Once again, it would be this Trinitarian pattern of Father, Son and Spirit that would serve as the basis for what would become, several 100 years later, the doctrine of the Trinity, as ratified and formalized in our historic creeds.

And the Trinity is simply the Christian way of saying “God is Love.” Simply the Christian way of saying “God is Love” – that at the heart of things, as we heard about in our opening prayer, there is *relationship*.

The Christian religion, in fact, is the *only* religion that can say *from eternity* that God is love. Otherwise, love only appears when God creates a world. But in the case of the Trinity, love preexists. Love is before all things; this rehearsal of love lies at the heart of all things, before all things, and at the end of all things. (It’s a nice parallel, incidentally, to what quantum physicists are saying today about relationship between the various bits of the universe.)

This question regarding why Isaiah, Paul and John were chosen for today is, accordingly, very easy to answer: Each has the Trinitarian pattern in it.

Now, a harder question to answer is this: What on earth is Paul talking about in the Second Reading?

He says we are debtors, but not because we owe our lives or our physical bodies to God. We are in debt, rather, because of the Spirit God has given us. But why, we might ask, are we in debt to God for the Spirit?

Because the Spirit frees us and reorients us back to God, such that we are no longer bound to gratifying our self-centered desires, but instead become capable of truly living for one another and finding God in our neighbor.

“Well,” we might reply, “that’s easy for Paul to say.”

Some years ago, there was a radio show interviewing a priest, and the host asked the priest, who was advanced in years, “Father, when do the hormones stop?” The priest replied, “Oh, about 15 minutes after you die.”

That’s why it’s important to remember, when it comes to the work of the Spirit, the words of Martin Luther. He says, “The Spirit is not instilled all at once, but gradually dispensed over the course of a lifetime.”

That is why I love, I absolutely *love*, the book of Acts and Second Corinthians, because both of them talk about how we *are being* saved. It’s not that we *were* saved or that we *will be* saved, but that we *are being saved*. Salvation, we learn – or being freed, or being healed, or being made whole – is a *process*, a lifelong process, and the progress we’ve made in the life of the Spirit is actually progress the Spirit is making in our lives by gradually freeing us for the love of others, instead of simply for the love of ourselves.

It’s also included so that no one may boast, “Look what I did!”

No – look what the Spirit has done, and is doing, in your life now.

Paul’s talk about receiving the Spirit raises one more question: What’s all this business about “being adopted” as children of God? I mean, a couple weeks ago, you heard how

Paul in Acts 17 quotes Greek philosophers and poets who say that we are God's offspring, simply by virtue of the fact that we have been born.

So, if from birth, we are *already* children of God, according to the book of Acts, why do we need to be adopted by God as well?

Well thankfully, this is a question we can answer too. Let me give you two examples: Weddings: when two people are married – love doesn't suddenly appear. Marriage typically, at least in Western culture, presupposes love for one another. Love is already there. What the wedding ceremony does is formalize, or make explicit, the love that is already there, as evident in the vows.

The same is true of baptism. We don't believe, as the ancient church did, that infants who are unbaptized are going to hell. We believe, rather, that they are *already* loved by God, and baptism makes this love explicit. It makes God's vow to us direct, and clear.

We see the same thing here. The Spirit *confirms* our status as "loved by God," as children of God, but (if you order now), it does something more. It signifies reconciliation with the God from whom we've been estranged due to the power of sin.

Remember, the Spirit's job is to reorient us away from ourselves, and back to God and our neighbor. There's this great line Martin Luther says, he says, "If you wish to seek God, stop looking up, but look down, down, down, and find God in your neighbor."

So, to say that God has adopted us as God's children, is to say that God accomplishes this by giving us the Spirit, and for that we are in debt, and for that we should be thankful. The Spirit is freeing us and making us whole.

And there you have it. This "Heir to Pastor Pflueger" doesn't just ask questions for the sake of asking questions. He does it – and he loves referring to himself in the third person – he does it because he believes there are actually *answers* to these questions, convincing answers to these questions; informed, text-based answers to these questions. I mean, now we know, because, again, this Heir of Pflueger asked the question, "Why were the readings chosen for today?"

Now we have an answer: They were chosen because they all contain a Trinitarian pattern with respect to talk about God.

And now we know why, secondly, Paul calls us debtors. It's not simply because we have bodies or that we have been born. It's that because of the Spirit, you might say, we have been born from above, to use the language from John 3.

And now we know why Paul speaks of God "adopting us" by giving us the Spirit. By virtue of our birth, we are already children of God, but, you might say, we are estranged from the Father, and so the Father claims us explicitly, just as God does in baptism, and just as two people do one another in a wedding – God claims us explicitly, and begins the healing process of reorienting us back to God and setting us free.

I don't know why our church isn't full; this is the most incredible message out there! In the Gospel, you have been informed by the Spirit in a way that is setting you free, in this life, from the gods of money and the god of the belly, as Paul says, to the God of the self – you have been set free, and each day is another step in that gradual process.

But now the hardest question remains, a question for which, once more, this Heir of Pflueger is often unprepared to answer:

How does this apply to our lives? How do we live according to the Spirit? What, if anything, can we do?

Well, I think there are at least three things we can do to live more fully into the life of the Spirit.

Number one, if you want to live in the Spirit, you have to put yourself in the right neighborhood. And thanks to you, that neighborhood is not just Queen Anne, it's Queen Anne Lutheran Church. You have to put yourself here in order to experience and grow this Spirit that is living within you.

Remember how the disciples received the Spirit, according to the Gospel of John? They gathered together in the upper room after Jesus had died, where the risen Christ gave them the Spirit. They were together. They were in the right neighborhood.

Who was the one who missed out, the one who doubted? Thomas, who was in isolation, who is at Macrina bakery this morning, instead of Queen Anne Lutheran Church! Once more, if you want to live in the Spirit, you have to put yourself in the right neighborhood, and keep as you're doing today, coming to church.

Number two, when you come to church, use this fellowship and our worship together as an opportunity to practice life in the Spirit. To practice life in the Spirit. Instead of automatically telling others how *you* are doing, why not start the conversation by asking them how *they* are doing, and then do something that only the Spirit can enable us to do: Listen. Listen to how they are doing.

In nearly eight years of ministry at Queen Anne Lutheran Church, there are some people in this congregation who have *never* asked me how I'm doing. And really listened. That's not to blame them. It's to say that we are together on this journey, and that all of us, myself included, need to *practice* life in the Spirit so that we can be freed from obsessive self-regard and centeredness.

Having practiced life in the Spirit, finally try it out in the real world: Help a stranger. Console a friend who is depressed or grieving, simply by listening to them. Try understanding others before judging them. Over time, you will notice, if not already, how the Spirit in these moments is working through you, opening you to others and freeing you from yourself. There are, in other words, moments where we forget ourselves in service to others, and there the Spirit of God lives in us – and that is something for which Pastor Pflueger and Pastor Peterson would agree, even if the latter “asks too many questions.”

Amen.