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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
5/19/2013, Pentecost Sunday
Romans 8:14–17, John 14:8–17, 25–27

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is Pentecost Sunday—the Church’s great celebration of the pouring out of the Holy Spirit of God upon the believers in Jesus Christ. The prophet Joel had promised that such a good day would come. He had promised that the Spirit would come upon lots of people, not just on a relatively few prophets. He looked forward to the day when the Spirit of God would fill the earth and every human heart. Joel’s famous promise goes this way:

After this I shall pour out my spirit on all humanity. Your sons and daughters shall prophesy, your old people shall dream dreams, and your young people see visions. ²Even on the slaves, men and women, shall I pour out my spirit in those days. (Joel 3:1-2, NJB)

Ahh! A *spirited* age is coming! High and holy and good spirits are a comin’. No more down-hearted spirits. No more spirits of depression, of anxiety, of regrets, oh regrets. A better age is coming.

We celebrate Pentecost because we believe that Joel’s ancient promise begins coming true on that first Pentecost Sunday. The disciples were gathered together. There was a new disciple among them—a man named Matthias. He had been chosen to take the place of Judas, who had betrayed our Lord and died. So, the number is full. There are twelve disciples again. Then, the great thing happened: the Holy Spirit came upon each one of them and filled them. We read about this in Acts 2:

²And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. ³Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. ⁴All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. (Acts 2:2-4, NRSV)

Then, this old world had best watch out! It is about to be shaken up and converted. This handful of disciples is small in number, but of great power, for

they have the Holy Spirit of God in them, and nothing remains calm, nothing remains contented with sin, nothing remains weary and old when the Spirit of God is afoot! And it is afoot in these disciples.

BEING LED BY THE SPIRIT

What I want to do this morning is to investigate *what this feels like*. What is it like to be ruled by the Holy Spirit? To help with this question, I turn to my main text for this morning's sermon. It is from our Epistle Lesson, from Romans 8. Saint Paul writes this:

¹⁴For all who *are led* by the Spirit of God are children of God. (Romans 8:14, NRSV)

Notice that the apostle uses a verb suggestive of action, not just possession. He does not say, "All who *have received* the Spirit are children of God," but something more vigorous: "All who *are led* by the Spirit..." In this life of ours, it matters who leads us. For example, when we went on our recent Coffee Hour pilgrimage to St. Elizabeth of Hungary Church, it mattered who led the way, else we could have ended up in Nebraska. Our little band of pilgrims was safe and sound because we were led by Crucifer Eric Voss, and he got us where we wanted to go. Likewise, being "led by the Spirit of God" concerns the governance of our lives. To use the good words of St. John Chrysostom, St. Paul would have the Holy Spirit control us:

... [to] use such power over our life as a pilot doth over a ship, or a charioteer over a pair of horses.

What I want to do in this sermon is explore what this is like—this being led by the Spirit. Is there an ordinary comparison to this extraordinary matter of being led by the Spirit of God? I think there is. I think we can compare being led by the Spirit of our *heavenly* Father to a child being led by the spirit of his or her *earthly* father.

Most parents do not want their children to grow up unguided. They do not want them to grow up like weeds in the field, with no particular content to their little souls. Therefore most parents try to teach and guide their children. It is as the Bible says:

⁶Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it. (Proverbs 22:6, KJV)

To be a good parent, then, is to be a preacher, at least to our little ones.

But we all know that there is something better than preaching! More important than our preaching and our teaching is the content of our own character. Excellence of soul is the true treasure we can pass on to our children. We should seek not only to talk of goodness, but to be good in reality. Then we have something good to pass on to our children. I am speaking of the *spirit* of our lives. If we ourselves live a good life, then we have a good spirit to pass on to our children. If we be brave, then our children see first hand something of a brave spirit. If we be compassionate, then our children experience a spirit of compassion. If we be noble of character, our children are permitted to know something of the spirit of nobility. If we be self-disciplined, our children gain some acquaintance with that virtue.

Altogether, it is a lovely thing when a mother or father of high character passes on their character to their children. It is a true blessing on earth when children walk in the spirit of good parents.

But, the thing is, it is not automatic. It is possible to *receive* a good example, but to fail to be *led* by that good example. It is possible to have a good earthly father, but not to walk in the spirit of that good father.

THE PRODIGAL SON

So it was with the Prodigal Son—at least during the portion of life we see in the parable. The son was not led by the spirit of his father.

His father, for example, was not a wastrel. If he had been, there would have been little inheritance for the prodigal son to request. But the father was a prudent man, and so over a lifetime accumulated a bequest which the younger son took and promptly lost. And so we come to those sad words:

¹³And not many days after the younger son gathered all together, and took his journey into a far country, and there wasted his substance with riotous living. (Luke 15:13, KJV)

Likewise, the father had a spirit of hope and forgiveness and longing for his son, so that his eyes were always cast toward the horizon, hoping that his wayward son would one day appear. But the son is moved by a different spirit. We get no sense from the story that the son cast a homesick eye backward as he headed off to that far country and his riotous living. Even when the son reaches rock bottom and resolves to go home, he does not seem to do so out of love for his father, but rather as a strategy for getting on his feet again:

And when he came to himself, he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! ¹⁸I will arise and go to my father...

This is good, that the young man decided to go home and throw himself on the mercy of his father. Yet, this young man might still have many miles to go before he is actually led by the spirit of his father.

The young man was being led by *some* spirit, naturally, but it was not the spirit of his father. But the great trick of life is to discern the spirit that is leading us. It is as Saint John says:

¹Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. (1 John 4:1, KJV)

We can hope that the Prodigal Son one day did grow into the spirit of his father. We can hope that he came to be led by his father's spirit.

PENTECOST

Now, the reason we celebrate Pentecost is that we mean to rejoice in a great wonder on earth: the wonder that ordinary people like you and me can be led by the Spirit of our heavenly Father. The spirit of our earthly fathers might be good, or might just be fair-to-middlin', or might be an awful spirit. But the Spirit of God is a good Spirit, and Pentecost rejoices in the idea that God is willing to share his Spirit with human beings and that we can be led by the very Spirit of God.

⁴⁸Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48, KJV)

If we could never catch the Spirit of God, this would be an impossible standard for us. We are to be "perfect." How? "... even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." Pentecost salutes your chance and my chance to come a whole lot closer to that than we have so far.

Pentecost, then, asks that we not underestimate ourselves. We know how to walk in the *ordinary* spirits of the age. We know how to do an ordinary day's labor, how to keep up with the Jones in fashion and possessions, how to correctly repeat the things we learned in schools or read in our newspaper. We know how to be led by many spirits in this world. Pentecost rejoices that if we want, we can follow the very Spirit of God.

RETURNING TO THE PRODIGAL SON

How does this happen? How can we receive and follow the Spirit of God? Well, let's return to the example of the Prodigal Son.

I image that the Prodigal Son received the spirit of his father in the same way that many children receive the spirit of their fathers: he learned about his father and his father's spirit through a combination of watching his father and listening to his father. In the case of the Prodigal Son, he declined to be *led* by his father's example, or by his father's instruction, but it is hard to imagine that the son did not at least detect something of his father's spirit. He might have despised the spirit of the old man, but at least he knew something of that spirit.

And the saving of this young man amounts to this: that one day, the spirit of his old father became a source of hope and renewal for the young man. He knew enough about his father to imagine that it would not be hopeless for him to go home to Dad and to try again.

Likewise with you and me when it comes to the Spirit of God. We know something about that Spirit. We know about it because if we have been living in the church for a while, we have both watched and listened to God. We have watched the patient dealings of God with Israel. Our eyes have followed along after Jesus and his goodness as he walked in the Spirit of God.

At his Baptism in the Jordan River, the Spirit descended upon our Lord Jesus, and he walked in that Spirit all his days. It is entirely natural and honest, then, that Jesus was able to give this good testimony:

³⁰I and my Father are one. (John 10:30, KJV)

We have seen enough and heard enough to have some kind of a feel for God's Spirit.

WE CAN! WILL WE?

What remains are two things: First, let us understand that God is not greedy when it comes to his Spirit. He is willing to share his Spirit with us. Indeed, every baptism includes the granting of the Holy Spirit to the believer. Such a gift involves at least this much: To each believer is granted a trustworthy invitation to "Come, walk with Jesus, and in the walking, become more like him."

When I say that this is a "trustworthy invitation," I mean that it is an invitation into a manner of life that God makes possible for us. What good would it do to be invited to jump to the moon? What good is an invitation that is not somehow matched by a capacity? But when God pours out his Holy

Spirit upon us in Baptism, he thereby grants us the capacity to do this good thing. We *can* walking with Jesus and in the walking, become more like him.

And the other thing is the personal thing: It is the matter of actually getting up and doing what needs to be done. It is this matter of being led by the Spirit. We know much about God, including this: he is willing for us to become more godly, more like him, and we can do it. Let what we know of God be our guide in this life for as our text says:

¹⁴For all who *are led* by the Spirit of God are children of God. (Romans 8:14, NRSV)

Let us, then, be not prodigal children, but true children of our heavenly Father, heirs of him and co-heirs with Christ, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.