



## Life in the Spirit

### Romans 8:12-17

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

May 30, 2021

Last Sunday we celebrated the gifting of the Spirit of God on Pentecost. The Spirit's empowerment gives life to the Church, as the individuals who comprise the church are strengthened and endowed with passion and gifts, and called together to witness as one Body, proclaiming the new life made possible by God in Jesus Christ.

Having brought forth creation, God the Father gives order to the created people; God the Son gifts new life to this created people; and God the Spirit empowers this created people to proclaim the promise of new life.

Today is Trinity Sunday – a day of the Christian year on which we are reminded of the doctrine of the Trinity. The idea of the Trinity came about in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century as the early church sought to understand the nature of God as three persons – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – which together give order, purpose, promise, and new life to the created humanity. In the course of the Christian calendar, Trinity Sunday falls right in the middle – half way between the beginning of Advent, and the end of the year (marked by Christ the King Sunday). The first half of the year focuses on Christ's life on earth – from his birth, to his teachings, to his crucifixion and resurrection, to his ascension. Following the gifting of the Spirit, we hit Trinity Sunday, and we enter into an extended season in the Church, which we call "Ordinary Time."

Ordinary does not, in this case, mean plain or unexciting. The word comes from the Latin, *ordinalis*, which means "numbered" or "ruled," like ordinal numbers. It refers to the ongoing and rhythmic nature of the Church following the celebration of Pentecost. It is a time to reflect on the life of Christ as a model for the life of the Church. This is the life of one living in the Spirit.

At Jesus' baptism, we're told that as he came up out of the water, the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove. This is the same imagery of the Church being endowed with the Spirit at Pentecost, as the Spirit descended on the disciples, this time, like a rushing wind. As the Spirit-gifted witness, the Church is then invited to live a life like that modeled by Christ – a life in the Spirit.

But what does that mean for us – to have life *in* the Spirit? What does it look like and mean for us, the Church, the members of the Body of Christ, to live a life in the Spirit, such that our lives might reflect and share in the same work of God that was witnessed in Christ, who also lived in the Spirit?

Paul, in his letter to the Romans addresses these questions for the early church. As we enter into this extended season, known as Ordinary Time, I thought it might be helpful for us to consider what it means for us – even still today – to live in the Spirit of God. Romans 8 offers a great starting point in this conversation.

As Paul was writing his letters to the early churches around the Mediterranean, he wrote to the communities as a whole. When he wrote to the Romans, his letter was not written to an individual, it was written to the whole body. Paul had this expectation that the letters he was writing would be read to the gathered community when it came together for a corporate time of worship or sharing. Because he was writing to the whole of the body, when Paul writes the word “you,” he is most often using the plural understanding of the word. The difference is clear in the Greek of the New Testament, but is often neglected in our English translations, which generally use the word “you” for both the singular and plural use.

Clearly a southerner wasn’t consulted in the translation, because, at least where I’m from, we would have substituted the word y’all.

In his writing, Paul goes back and forth – interjecting with the singular form at specific moments, while still reverting back to the plural and corporate form for the majority of his writing. Let me give one example as we enter into our reading for today.

In Chapter 8, beginning in verse 9, Paul writes, “But y’all are not in the flesh; y’all are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in y’all.” All three of these are in the plural; Paul is speaking of y’all, the corporate community. The community of faith, having been gifted with the Spirit, is no longer of “the flesh” – that is, we are no longer defined by worldly desires. We are, as a community gifted with the Spirit, now *in the Spirit* because God’s Spirit dwells within us.

As Paul continues writing, he shifts saying, “Anyone,” in the singular form, “any individual who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

But then he shifts back, writing, “But if Christ is in y’all,” the community, “though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness.”

Professor Sarah Heaner Lancaster speaks of the importance of this shift in language. She says, and I quote, “In our time, English-speaking Western readers (especially those who read the Bible for private study) would probably read this passage understanding “you” as addressing them individually. Indeed, Protestants have a long history of reading Romans as a description of the life of individual believers – examining one’s own heart and motives, trusting in one’s own justification by faith, seeking to be assured of one’s own salvation. This way of reading Paul has had benefit for many, but it also has its limits.” She goes on to say, speaking specifically of these verses in Romans 8, “You are not and do not have to be an individual without the Spirit because you are in a community where the Spirit dwells.”<sup>i</sup>

Did you pick that up? Even if you, individually, do not have the Spirit, because Christ is present in the community, the individual who is lacking in Spirit might have life, because of the presence of the Spirit in the whole.

This is what Paul means when he talks about being adopted into the family of God.

As we get into verses 12-17, our text for this morning, it is worth naming that the idea of being *family* is not always a welcome invitation. Being family is often messy. In a recent clergy thread, I had a colleague inviting people to refrain from calling the church a family, because the term is not a universally welcoming invitation. For those who have been hurt by family, abandoned by family, abused by family, or left without family, the word *family* can be a uninspiring invitation.

And yet, in his definition, Paul invites a different perspective of family by addressing the power dynamic. Generally speaking, the challenges of family come from power – abuse of power, uncontrolled power, holding on to power, vacating power. In defining the family of God, Paul says all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. (Again, he's using plural pronouns, addressing the community as a whole.) He says that as a community led by the Spirit, we become not just any children, but we are all children who have received a spirit of adoption. We have been chosen – we have been welcomed – we have been embraced – we have been accepted as members of the family. What we did not have, we now have because of the gifting of the Spirit. It's intentional and invitational.

And it's a family without the struggle of power dynamics. In the first century, family order was of utmost importance. The first and oldest son would receive the family inheritance. We see family order play an important role in the stories of the Bible, like in the story of Cain and Abel, in the parable of the prodigal son, and in the story of Jacob and Esau. There's often a difficulty between siblings who each want to be the rightful heir of the family legacy – talk about unhealthy power dynamics. (I'm looking at you Cain.)

But as Paul defines the family of God as brought together by the Spirit, there is no family order. In fact, Paul goes on to say that we, even as adopted children, are heirs of God. We, corporately, (y'all) are heirs of God. And not just any heirs, we are joint heirs with Christ. We are welcomed as the Body of Christ in the world to be equal in our receipt of God's love to Christ, himself. That, my friends, is how amazing God's love in the world is. We aren't offered any less of God than the Son – we are equal heirs, co-heirs, in the family of God.

This vision of family, this idea that all are invited and welcomed, it is the very foundation of Paul's belief around who we are as those living in the Spirit. We are united as a corporate body, heirs of God's love, unified as God's own, sharing in this life as a family that doesn't suffer from the toxic abuse or misuse of power. And yes, there are times when our human families present a challenge to embracing the family motif, but as Professor Paul Achtemeier offers, perhaps, instead of dismissing this motif, we should discuss "how the family of God provides a model for the way the human family ought to function."<sup>ii</sup>

The family is empowered to work as one, gifted to share together, called to be unified in its purpose. And, going back to verse 17, that means sharing together in the good and the bad. “We are joint heirs with Christ – if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.” Asserting the promise of being joint heirs with Christ means accepting the glory of God’s love and also receiving the pain of the world’s rejection of God’s love.

“To be a member of God’s family surely promises life and joy in the future, but to be the child of a Father against whom the world stands in rebellion means that the rebellion will also be directed at us.”<sup>iii</sup> Paul doesn’t say that a life in the Spirit is nothing but peaches and crême; he doesn’t say this life will fit the worldly understanding of idyllic. Indeed, if anything, Paul asserts this life will not satisfy the desires of the flesh. In a faithful reality, it won’t just deny the desires of the flesh, it will, in response, denounce them.

In his definition of “life in the Spirit,” Paul says to the Romans, life in the Spirit means being adopted into the family of God, to become co-heirs with Christ to the joy and love of the Almighty, and to share in both the glory and the pain that such an allegiance provokes. And that to be welcomed into the family of God, to become part of this household, means that we are no longer held captive to the weight of sin that defines the flesh, but we are freed from fear to proclaim the glory of God, the promise of new life, and the joy of sharing in this life together.

So receive the Spirit, claim your co-habitant seat at the family table, know that you are not alone. We are adopted into the family together, so that we might profess and proclaim and exemplify the love of God in the world. May our witness be true to the invitation. Amen? Amen.

---

<sup>i</sup> Sarah Heaner Lancaster. *Romans: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015.

<sup>ii</sup> Paul J. Achtemeier. *Romans: Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1985.

<sup>iii</sup> Achtemeier.