

Written for Sunday morning worship at the Chapel of the Resurrection at Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN | The Day of Pentecost | June 5, 2022

Readings: [Acts 2:1-21](#); [Romans 8:14-17](#); [John 14:8-17, 25-27](#)

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

We are children of God. As Christians we hear and say that phrase a lot, but this morning I’d like you to hold it and feel it for a moment. We are children of God.

Many of us hear that phrase and think immediately of acceptance and comfort:

*Children of the heav’nly Father,
Safely in his bosom gather;
Nestling bird nor star in heaven
Such a refuge e’er was given.¹*

And that is one of the meanings contained in the words “children of God.” It’s a powerful message. In my previous congregation, on the day of the Baptism of Our Lord, we would wet our thumbs with water and make the sign of the cross on each person’s forehead, reminding them, “You are a child of God.” And tears would well up in their eyes just to be reminded that God had claimed them as God’s own.

But imagine that after this worship service we all went out and caught a matinee of the latest Marvel movie. Early in the plot rumors start swirling about some new, mysterious group that’s out there making the news – they call themselves, “the Children of God.”

In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, we wouldn’t hear that and think, “Oh, people who’ve found inner peace!” We’d hear “Children of God” and think, “Ooo...I bet they’re claiming to have some kind of special ability or authority, some kind of mission....maybe they’re getting special attention from Thanos.” If it were Marvel, “Children of God” would be a claim to power, right?

I think the same thing is true on Pentecost.

Think about it: the story begins with a sudden “sound like the rush of a violent wind” – the sound of a powerful force beyond human control. And then tongues of fire – another powerful force, as we know all too well on this campus – tongues of fire settle on the disciples and they uncontrollably start speaking in foreign languages.

And as people begin to ask, “What does this mean?” Peter interprets: it’s the power God promised to us long ago. God will pour out the Holy Spirit on everyone, and we will prophesy

¹ Carolina Sandell Berg, [“Children of the Heavenly Father.”](#) trans. Ernst W. Olson, *Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 781.

(that is, speak God's powerful Word – even when it means speaking truth to power); we will have visions (that is, gain holy insight from God) – and Creation itself will be transformed.

And for us this morning, another promise of power is echoing in the room. Right before his crucifixion, Jesus promised his disciples that God would send them the Spirit. And he promised them power that will come with the Spirit: "Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these."

Like many passages in scripture that teach us about the Spirit or about being children of God – today's readings ring with power. But what kind of power?

My mother grew up in Germany. She met my dad – a dashing American in a classic 1970s polyester suit – when they were both in their twenties, and came back to the states with him after they were married. My dad picked up a bit of German during the years he lived in the country, but he's never been anywhere near fluent. They were able to communicate and fall in love because my mom had to study English in school, and she was pretty close to fluent when they met.

Why did my mom have to learn English in school, before she ever dreamed of moving to the U.S.? Because English is the common tongue of the western world. The language of business and diplomacy; the language there's a good chance someone else in a foreign country will also know how to speak. One time my family got lost somewhere in Greece, and we were able to stop a passing jogger and get directions in English!

In Jesus's time and place, that common tongue was Greek.

My mom has lived in the U.S. since the 80s. She is perfectly fluent; English is the language of her everyday life; she barely has an accent. But German has never stopped being the language of her heart. All the cutesy childhood nicknames she called me were in German. When I was a toddler and she zipped up my coat, she'd say *kopf hoch* – German for "head up!" so that the zipper wouldn't pinch my chin. When she dropped something on her foot, she'd let out a long string of words in German. German is the language she mothered in; the language she cursed in; the language she dreamed in.

After all: German is the language of her earliest memories; it's the language her mother used to comfort her; the language her dad used to announce they were going on vacation; the language she used when she was 12 to whisper secrets to her sister. You should see the way her eyes light up when she gets to talk to someone in German.

When the Holy Spirit comes at Pentecost, the Spirit doesn't cause the disciples to preach powerfully in Greek, the language most people would have understood. The Holy Spirit doesn't cause the disciples to speak in their own native tongues, and then work to make everyone else understand.

The Holy Spirit causes the disciples to speak to the people in their own native tongues – the languages of their hearts.

What kind of power is that? *What does this mean?*

The power given to the disciples on the Day of Pentecost – the Holy Spirit power that has been passed on to us – is the power to create connection and belonging. It's the power of grace – grace that reaches out to individuals exactly as they are and claims them as children of God. "It is the grace that replaces our fantasies of power over people with God's fantasy for desire for people."²

At the risk of sounding like Martin Luther's *Small Catechism*, I'll ask one more time: What does this mean?

On the Day of Pentecost, God took the ancient, greatest-of-commandments: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself" – and turned it into fireworks.

It's now wonder that in the last chapters of the Gospel of John, on the eve of the crucifixion, Jesus is promising the disciples over and over that God will send them the Spirit, that he and God the Father will continue to be present with them even after he is gone – and those promises are intertwined with the repeating command: "Love one another. Love one another as I have loved you."

Because as God's Spirit is given to us, that holy presence helps us to know that we are loved by God – and it fills us with a portion of God's love for other people. It's a holy, fierce love that not only guides us to be kind – it empowers us.

God's love empowers us with a vision of the world as God wants it to be – a vision that helps us see beyond the way the world tells us things just have to be.

God's love empowers us to dream dreams of a world that is better for our fellow human beings.

God's love empowers us to be brave for ourselves and for others.

God's love is the powerful love that leads to the creation of our world; to the exodus of God's children from slavery; to God taking on human flesh and even dying; to Jesus's resurrection; to freedom from the power of sin; and one day, the renewal of all creation. God's love makes all good, loving things possible – even in the midst of this broken time.

That is the love that is in us now. That is the power that is in us now. Because we are children of God.

² Willie James Jennings, *Acts*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), p. 35. Much of this sermon was inspired by Jennings' commentary.

Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, we name you wind, power, force, and then, imaginately, "Third Person."

We name you and you blow...blow hard, blow cold, blow hot, blow strong, blow gentle, blow new...

Blowing the world out of nothing to abundance, blowing the church out of despair to new life, blowing little David from shepherd boy to messiah, blowing to make things new that never were.

So blow this day, wind – blow here and there, power – blow even us, force – Rush us beyond ourselves, rush us beyond our hopes, rush us beyond our fears, until we enact your newness in the world. Come, come spirit. Amen.³

³ Walter Brueggemann, "To make things new that never were," *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003) p. 167.