

May 28th: Heirs

Good morning again, friends! This morning we continue our year-long sermon series—we've been reading through the whole Bible from the beginning to the end and seeing how these ancient texts can be relevant to our modern lives. Along the way, we've read about nomadic people, people under empire, and now we turn to a new stage of our text which is focused on the birth of a new group of people: the very first Christians.

I'm going to keep my thoughts brief this morning so that we can continue to enjoy the beautiful music of our symphony guests—but before we begin, would you take a moment to pray with me?

Faithful God, from generation to generation, your beloved children have told your story and claimed it as our own. Whether in ancient times or modern day moments, your people have proclaimed your good news and labored for justice for all of creation. Today we celebrate your everlasting care for us, which we see through the beauty of this world, the actions of our loved ones, and the grace we experience in your presence. Fill us with your Spirit this morning, and empower us to continue the work of creating and sustaining wholeness in our world so that your story can be passed down to others in the future. Amen.

As I mentioned, today is the celebration of Pentecost, which marks the arrival of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-cultural church. This is the moment when Jesus' movement turns into a global phenomenon, with people of all ages, nations, languages, and backgrounds are brought together for a common purpose. It's a spectacular milestone, and from this day on, we see that it is God's desire that his church be as diverse as possible because all of these different voices and experiences are a strength to be celebrated, not a weakness to be avoided.

Three weeks ago, we introduced the Epistle to the Romans, which is a letter written by Paul to the newly established church in Rome. It's the first century CE, and only a few decades after Jesus' death and resurrection, so it's a strange and stressful time for the first Christians. It's also a few decades after Pentecost, and the hope a multicultural church is still very much alive, but they

are also navigating an adversarial political climate, changes within their movement, and how to communicate and clarify important theological questions. It's a lot!

As a pastor myself, I can empathize with the leaders of this congregation and the challenges that they are facing. These leaders, like Phoebe the deacon, and Priscilla and Aquila the apostles, are in charge of a growing congregation with rapidly changing demographics—they had started out with a church of mostly Jews and a few Gentile converts, only to end up with a church of majority Gentiles and a minority of traditional Jews. As they've widened their community and welcomed new members, they've had to wrestle with this diversity. As we've seen in Paul's writings, a lot of his advice is directed towards a desire for unity and mutuality in the midst of differing opinions and beliefs—but putting that into practice is definitely harder than it sounds. It's a wonderful idea to foster inclusion and equity, but the actual work is sometimes filled with conflict and constant disagreement. And that can wear on leaders or members of a movement.

And so, in the midst of these transitions and transformations, this Roman congregation might have some questions about what the next phase of their ministry is going to look like. Anyone who was present at the very first Pentecost is now many decades older, and the first leaders are trying to figure out how to hand over the reigns to newer, younger leaders. And then, once they have some clarity about how to do this transfer of power, they have to have vision, and energy, and the leadership skills to get everyone on board and ready to go. They might have wondered: how should they pass along their faith to a new generation of disciples who never had the opportunity to meet Jesus or any of the original twelve disciples? What wisdom or knowledge needs to be collected and made ready to share with new converts who have no cultural or religious framework for Jesus' movement? How are they supposed to communicate the gospel to people who have no clue what the church is supposed to be about?

There were probably many sleepless nights for them where they stressed about how to meet together as a diverse body, how to navigate tensions

between factions, and how to communicate all these changes in such a short period of time. They probably tossed and turned in their beds thinking about how it was going to be possible for this community to continue in uncertain times with new leadership. I know I would have, I'm getting stressed out just thinking about it!

And even though we are two thousand years removed from this particular context and situation, I think we would do well to ask some of the same questions in our own congregation. Just as we celebrated our history last week, I think it's also important that we have one eye on the future as well, so that we can also pass down our faith to the next generation and prepare them for future ministry and service.

So we turn to Paul's advice for this ancient congregation, and I think his words of wisdom still hold up. In particular, I want us to pay attention to verses 16 and 17, where Paul writes: "The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."

This early church might have been asking themselves, "what does it mean to be an heir of God?"

I think that most of the time, when we think about being an heir, we think about inheritance. And when we think about inheritance, we think about physical items. We think of assets or property like houses, bank accounts, retirement funds, heirlooms, jewelry, antiques, furniture, or treasured keepsakes like photo albums. We think of tangible things that can physically be transferred from one person to another.

And in the church, these physical items are pretty important. I think many of us would agree that a building to meet in is an important part of a community's long term future. Things like expensive pianos and other instruments, and altar decorations, and photo albums are all part of telling the congregation's story. But Paul also knows that buildings can be destroyed, and pianos can go out of tune, and photo albums can turn to dust, so Paul is asking

us to consider a different kind of inheritance—inheritance in the spiritual sense. To be heirs of God is not about inheriting property or a financial endowment, but about receiving a life-giving faith. The crowd gathered at Pentecost received the gift of the Holy Spirit, which sparked a deep passion for service and transformation.

So when we think about spiritual inheritances, I think we should remember that a community passes down non-physical things too. Both the ancient Roman congregation and our modern one have been tasked with passing down things like memories, stories, legacies, belief systems, mindsets, lessons learned, and values. We are here worshiping in this sanctuary today, because a previous generation of Christians welcomed us into the life of faith and shared these intangible gifts with us, and now, we must also consider how we are going to do the same.

If our vision for the future includes a new generation, we have to consider how we are going to communicate this divine story of an intentionally diverse community, where all are invited to share in the love of God. We have to consider how we are going to shepherd a movement where people of all ethnicities, cultures, races, languages, and experiences are cherished for who they are and empowered to be disciples. We have to consider that our daily actions are passing down our values and our legacies just as much as our big decisions and our big moves.

When some of our leadership met to talk about this community and our hopes for the future, we imagined this congregation like a mosaic: all kinds of colors and textures and sizes coming together to tell one beautiful story. We imagined that together, all of our individual stories would find a common purpose, a united vision of hope and wholeness for our community and our world.

If you look at our new logo and our new website, I hope that this desire is clear, I hope that this will be the foundation for the next stage of our collective ministry. Because my friends, we are all dearly beloved children of God,

recipients of the Holy Spirit, and our diversity will always be our strength, rather than a weakness.

I hope that will be our forever legacy.

Amen.