

Pentecost Sermon – June 4, 2006
Preached by Susan Flanders

Have you ever looked through the personal ads in the paper – or at one of the on-line dating services? There was a time when I confess I did – at least I looked. And I thought about what I might write – it was amazingly difficult! Grandmother priest with decent legs? I don't think so! Episcopal minister seeks spiritual companion? Don't think the phone would ring off the hook for that one! Seriously – how do you describe yourself? What is your identity?

Of course there are all kinds of things that make up our various identities. But what is most important? What can undergird all the rest, and, because we all share it, tie us together despite our differences? It's that tie that St. Paul points to when he says there are varieties of gifts but the same spirit.

This identity is the one given us by our God. This identity is Child of God. Our creation myth in Genesis says we are created in the image of God – God's own likeness in each of us! And in Jesus, there came a man who prayed to God as Daddy, who must have felt God's likeness intensely, must have really felt he was a child of God. He must have felt this especially at his baptism, when the voice of the Spirit came: "You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased". Jesus lived and died with this assurance, this blessing. His resurrection affirmed his identity as belonging to God – always and forever, through life, death and beyond.

All of us are children of God, and it is this identity that Christians celebrate especially at baptism and especially on Pentecost. We celebrate individuals as children of God at baptism. Today we baptize Colin, Mary Grace and Abigail into God's love, naming them and claiming for them this identity – beloved children of God. Each of them is unique in all creation. They and their particular lives will never be replicated. Each is an expression of God's love and God's life. At baptism, we affirm this belief.

When we baptize on Pentecost, we connect this belief to the life of the whole church. According to the dramatic story in Acts, it was on the first Pentecost that with mighty wind and tongues of flame, the church was born into its identity as the Body of Christ. The amazing, empowering Holy Spirit took hold of the disciples and empowered them to speak the Good News about Jesus in the languages of all gathered. In this event the whole community understood itself as beloved children of God – members of Christ's new body in the world. This was the birthday and baptism of the church through the power of the Holy Spirit. That's why, after the service, there will be birthday cakes in the Parish Hall – symbols, like our own birthday cakes, of our precious identity as children of God.

But many of us have a hard time feeling that we are children of God. This blessing can be hidden from us, and this identity may be a long time in coming. Sadly, many of us can feel unworthy of this identity. We need parents and grandparents and God-parents and teachers and friends and a whole society to give us this message. Bill and I have just come from Chicago where we were part of Grandparents' Day at three of his grandchildren's school. I was there as a step-grandparent, but I soon realized that the school, realizing not all kids had grandparents who could come, had invited each child to bring a "special person", and this allowed for not only step-grandparents, but favorite baby-sitters, aunts and uncles and older siblings, even best friends of parents – a wonderful tribute to how much our children look to and need the love of many people as they grow. A few children seemed to have no one, and they seemed forlorn – was there no one in their lives who wasn't too busy to be there for them? So much of our sense of being beloved comes to us through others – God's love poured out through human channels – so

variously shaped, and, sometimes the channels get blocked. We can feel cut off from that love, or we ourselves can get in its way.

A couple of months ago, in the Living the Questions class, we heard a story that I knew right away that I would be telling you today. It is one of the best Pentecost and Baptism stories I've ever heard. (N.) tells it from her experience at a retreat with a group of pastors. In one of the Bible study sessions, each person was asked to come up with the name of someone in the Bible whose story really spoke personally to them – a name with which he or she could identify. When it came time, each one spoke – until finally there was just one man left – young, still in his 20's. He sat silently in the circle for the longest time. It grew awkward as people shifted, peeked at their watches. Finally, the leader urged him: “Is there a name that you want to claim – any that you've wanted from these stories that seems to speak of you and your story?”

At first, more silence, but finally, the young man spoke: “There are name I've wanted – I've tried hard – but none of these names is strong enough to replace the name I've carried all my life. My father gave me this name – this name, is – Not Good Enough. Not Good Enough”, and, as he repeated it, he began to weep, crying as if he would never stop. The group at first seemed paralyzed - no way they could assuage the power of his emotion, his devastation. But then an impulse moved through the group. The leader says it was sort of like a rush of wind, and they got up – all of them and went to the young man, surrounding him there on his chair. And they laid hands upon him, upon his head and shoulders, and then the words came – their several voices, but sounding like one “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased”. The young man was quiet.

Afterwards, at the end of the retreat as they were packing up, the leader asked the young pastor: “Will that make a difference – what happened?” He said, “I don't know – I feel as if something was broken, and now it isn't – but from now on, every time I put my hands in the water to name another human being before God, I'll know who I am.”

What is your identity? Maybe you've never thought about it in terms of being a child of God – but you are – beloved – each of you. We need to know this and feel this, and all people need to know this and feel this if ever God's reign comes in this world. May the children we baptize today know this, live into this belovedness. May each of us know it for ourself, even if we've come by it hard, come by it late. Most importantly, may we treat all other people, everywhere, despite however different they are, as beloved children of God too. Baptism and Pentecost are powerful reminders in the Christian tradition of our this – our deepest human identity. Amen