

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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May 15, 2016 Pentecost Sunday

Acts 2:1-21

Romans 8:14-17

THE ADOPTER

The situation was desperate in Romania in the late 1980's and early 1990's. The communist government had recently fallen. The economy and the state of order there were in a shambles. Gradually, it came to light that among the most seriously impacted were orphans who were receiving far from adequate care. There was a couple in my church in Georgia at that time which had been unable to have children and they traveled to Romania to try to adopt a child. These orphans, by the harsh situation in which they were living, were seen as those who did not merit an adequate share of scarce resources. They were not being adequately fed. Their shelter did not keep them warm. Beyond the lack of physical resources for the children, there was a severe shortage of caring people working with them to nurture them in the difficult circumstances that cruelly gripped those who were most vulnerable. The couple was able to bring home a little boy who they joyfully chose to be their own through adoption. The whole congregation, when they first saw little Michael and the happy parents, rejoiced at the prospect of a whole new future. By God's grace, they had become family.

Today is Pentecost, a time when we celebrate the outpouring of God's Spirit which brought about the birth of the church. Followers of a resurrected Jesus did not know what to do once they realized that he would no longer be physically present with them. Jesus had told them to wait for the coming of the Spirit to empower and guide them. But before the Spirit's coming, one could look at that group and clearly see that they had no chance of being an influential force in the difficult religious and political terrain in which they found themselves. However, once the Spirit came, things would look quite different. Our passage from Romans describes the Spirit that was at work as a Spirit of adoption. Indeed, the followers of Jesus discovered a sense of belonging and care that accompanied the Spirit's coming. The Spirit having adopted them helped them see themselves and their place in the world quite differently than they had before.

French artist, Claude Monet, was at the forefront of the impressionist movement. This was a style of painting that showed a different way of seeing reality, with freely brushed colors that took precedence over lines and contours. The early reviews of impressionism as a movement were quite negative and satirical, until it was recognized as showing a fresh and original vision that was inspired and inspiring.¹ Toward the end of his life, cataracts affected Monet's vision and he was hesitant to have them removed, as their presence enabled him to see things a bit differently than others. In Pulitzer Prize winning poet, Lisel Mueller's poem, "Monet Refuses the Operation," she imagines the great artist's voice in resisting his eye doctor's advice, describing what he saw to paint some of his masterpieces.

Doctor, you say there are no haloes
around the streetlights in Paris
and what I see is an aberration
caused by old age, an affliction.
I tell you it has taken me all my life
to arrive at the vision of gas lamps as angels,
to soften and blur and finally banish
the edges you regret I don't see,
to learn that the line I called the horizon
does not exist and sky and water,
so long apart, are the same state of being.
Fifty-four years before I could see
Rouen cathedral is built
of parallel shafts of sun,
and now you want to restore
my youthful errors: fixed
notions of top and bottom,
the illusion of three-dimensional space,

wisteria separate
from the bridge it covers.
What can I say to convince you
the Houses of Parliament dissolve
night after night to become
the fluid dream of the Thames?
I will not return to a universe
of objects that don't know each other,
as if islands were not the lost children
of one great continent. The world
is flux, and light becomes what it touches,
becomes water, lilies on water,
above and below water,
becomes lilac and mauve and yellow
and white and cerulean lamps,
small fists passing sunlight
so quickly to one another
that it would take long, streaming hair
inside my brush to catch it.
To paint the speed of light!
Our weighted shapes, these verticals,
burn to mix with air
and changes our bones, skin, clothes
to gases. Doctor,
if only you could see
how heaven pulls earth into its arms
and how infinitely the heart expands
to claim this world, blue vapor without end. ²

Let me clarify that I am thankful that cataracts can be removed to improve people's vision. And yet, there is a way of seeing that is different from the way many people see. There are those who look at the church in our society and see an institution in decline. There certainly has been a growth in the number of those who see little need to connect with a church or a faith community. There are plenty of indicators and voices telling mainline churches in particular that their demise is certain. But the Spirit who has adopted us gives us reason and an ability to see things differently.

In our reading from the Book of Acts, we heard Peter speaking to the crowd on Pentecost Day refer to the passage from the book of Joel which describes young people seeing visions and older people who dream dreams. The Holy Spirit who has adopted us helps us see ourselves differently. We are not unwanted, uncared for, individuals lacking a family to which to belong. The Spirit enables us to see our world differently. Perhaps there are halos and angels where other people don't see them. And indeed heaven pulls earth into its arms, infinitely the divine heart expands to claim this world. And as we worship, as we reflect God's love even for those who feel most rejected, as we proclaim resurrection life and possibility when others see a dead end, as we demonstrate compassion in a callous world, we show that we see things differently. As we have adopted our confirmation group into membership in the church this Pentecost Day, we see that we have a paint brush in our hands and a canvas before us so we can show others what our Adopting Spirit helps us to see. I'm not sure what the future holds for the church in our society. But I'm confident that we have an Adopter who will never abandon us, who will love us through each and every challenge.

By the way, the little boy, Michael, about whom I was telling you – he has faced some challenges. But things look different to him now. He is now a young man who knows he is loved, who knows to whom he belongs, who knows he will not be abandoned. The canvas of his life is not yet fully painted, but since with great love and care, he was adopted, his future is so very much brighter. My friends, we too have been adopted. Thanks be to God.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Impressionism>

² Lisel Mueller, "Monet Refuses the Operation," *Alive Together: New & Selected Poems*, LSU Press, 1996, Winner of the Pulitzer Prize for Poetry.