

The Drama of Adoption
Romans 8:12-17; Galatians 4:4-6
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I've used this parable before, so I apologize. And I know I shouldn't begin with an apology, but there you go. It's such a good parable that I want to use it again. It's a parable written by a Dutch philosopher who is explaining what our sickness unto death is. Our sickness unto death is the power and presence of sin. But Kierkegaard would write about what has Jesus done for us. And this picture was given from him through this parable of an emperor and a day laborer. I can't read all of it, but I'll simply summarize for our hearing this morning.

In this parable, the day laborer is working in the countryside. He recognizes the high and exalted place of his king. An occasional encounter with the emperor, the king, would be delightful, enough so that the laborer could keep his own comfortable life, keep his friends, keep his identity, and yet have it embellished by the honor of the king. A little favor, just a little favor now and then from the king, would make total sense to this laborer. But the king wants to make this laborer his own son. The prospect of adoption is of such an offense because it is so close—it is of a closeness that requires giving up one's own identity. Yes, it is a high and exalted act. Might it make this laborer, this common poor man, the laughing stock of his village? Maybe. Wouldn't he lose all that is precious to him if he were to ascend to be the king's son? Maybe. And so Kierkegaard says, such a thing is too high for me. I cannot grasp it. To be perfectly blunt, to me it is a piece of folly. It would be wonderful if the king would just give me some money, a letter to cherish as a relic, to frame and place on my wall. But the king is asking so much more of me. The king is asking more than just to be an accessory to my life. The king wants me to be fully identified in my entire life as his son. He wants to exalt me to be the child of the king.

This is the drama of adoption. It is not God as an article of faith, simply to come alongside our already well-lived lives. It means to make us completely and utterly new. Hear now the words of Paul in the Book of Romans and its parallel passage in Galatians chapter four. Hear now God's Word.

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation--but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "'Abba,' Father." 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. [Romans 8:12-17]

But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons. Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "'Abba, Father.'" [Galatians 4:4-6]

This is the Word of God. Thanks be to God. May God bless the preaching of his Word.

Paul, in these two sections of his letters, uses very directly the metaphor of adoption to represent salvation itself. Salvation, the gospel, is a diamond, and that diamond has different facets, but they are the same diamond. That diamond is that God has brought those who are sinners, who fall short of the glory of God, to be united to him as his children through the work of the body and blood of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And he unites us to him by faith. This act, this gospel, this diamond, has different facets through which to see it, and one of those facets is adoption—and it is the drama of adoption, because it has characters. It has also an incredible punch-line. But it also has an invitation for us to join that drama. You see in your outline, it is a Trinitarian act. It is double grace. And it invites us from fear to freedom. Trinitarian act, double grace, fear to freedom.

Trinitarian act. The beauty of this facet of our union with Christ, our salvation with Christ, is itself adoption. And in this work of adoption, it is a Trinitarian act—meaning all of the members of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, are intricately involved in this act. It's right here for us in the full section of these verses. We hear the Father, because it is the one who is God the Father that we call our father. It is his will to make children out of those who were once his enemies. We heard it when we read this morning from Genesis chapter three, that though Adam and Eve were his children, meant to be with him for all eternity, said, "We do not want you as father. We ourselves want to be God." And that fellowship, that union, was broken. And therefore, the need of reconciliation.

But that reconciliation could not just be the will of Adam and Eve. It must be the desire of the one who has been offended against—the Father who has created us—his desire, his will. And so we heard it in Genesis three—though in the midst of judgment of both Satan and Adam and Eve, his children, God gives the promise, that through the seed of the woman, which would point to Jesus Christ—it is not men. It is not children. It is the child. It is singular, "the seed of the woman" would what? Would crush the head of the serpent, though the serpent would bruise his heel. That is pointing to the work of Christ. That has always been the will of the Father—to reconcile his creation to himself, most principally in those who are the crown of his creation, son and daughters. Adam and Eve, and their descendants. We are their descendants. It is the will of the Father. Through the words of Jesus himself, through the words of his apostles, we would hear that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God—the glory of God the Father, his holy and righteous self. But it is the Father who comes. And this passage tells us, it is the Father who we call Abba.

But the agency through which the Father would draw us to himself is Jesus Christ. Jesus, here, is the agent, because it is through the work of Jesus Christ. Paul tells us in Galatians, at just the right time, God the Father sent his Son born of a woman, born under the law. Jesus, giving up his glory and his place at the right hand of God the Father, became flesh and walked among us, full of grace and truth, John tells us. But he wasn't just born of a woman—he was born under law, meaning he took himself and he placed himself, though the righteous Son of God, put himself in our place as those under the weight of the law—all of its righteous requirements, all of its holy purity—and Christ obeyed the law in every way that we are supposed to but cannot, because we fall short of the glory of God because of our sin. Christ was born under the law. To be what? To be our righteousness. Through Christ, born under the law, that we might be the full righteous sons, so that it would be what? It would be through Christ and his being born under the law, living under the law, presenting himself as a righteous sacrifice in our place.

Through the agency of Christ, we can be made sons. Now, why is sons always mentioned? It is because in that culture, to receive an inheritance, you must be a son. If you were a daughter and had no brothers, you could not receive the inheritance. But it is for this that Paul continues to use the word "sons", because he then writes in Galatians, "In Christ there is neither slave nor free, Jew nor Gentile, male nor female." In other words, men and women alike become like sons, full recipients of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

So the Father's will, the Son's work, but then also the work of the Holy Spirit. In both, we hear the Spirit comes and testifies in the spirit of those who believe by faith that you are indeed a child of God. The spirit of sonship, he calls it, through whom—by the Spirit. By the Spirit, we call him Abba, Father. So the Spirit comes in as the one who is enlivening, enabling, and, indeed, uniting us to Christ. It is a mystery. It is hard to come up with any analogy or any metaphor. But it is a Father who looked out and said, I will draw children to myself. The means by which we become children is through his Son. And when we

receive his Son, we become sons and daughters of the King. And when we do, we receive the Holy Spirit as a guarantee, as a down payment, as a recipient of those of great gifts of God himself—his presence by the Spirit. And it is the Spirit who prays for us when we don't know what to pray. It is the Spirit who enlivens our desire to want to know the Lord. It is the Spirit who brings the Word and writes it on our hearts. It is the Spirit that gives us grace and power to walk in the way. It is a complete Trinitarian act—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—to give us this great gift, double grace.

I borrow this phrase from the theologian John Calvin, because he says, “In adoption, in the gospel, we receive this double grace.” The double grace is twofold. First, we looked at it last week and the week before—the act of justification. God is the one who is both the justified and the justifier. As we looked at, because of our sin, the law of God does nothing for us except tell us where we fall short. And yet God does not remove his righteous requirements. He doesn't forget them. He doesn't bury them under the bed. In fact, he brings out the law of God, and it stands before us as one that says before God, who can stand? And yet Christ, instead of forgetting the law—Christ came as one under the law. It is what theologians call a forensic act.

We have sinned against God the Father, the Judge, and yet God, in a legal act, brings justification. What does that mean? It means, simply, that Christ came under the law to receive—what? To receive the wrath that we deserve. See, he obeyed the law completely, and yet there needed to be a sacrifice for our failure before the righteousness of God. And yet Christ, before God the Judge, received all of the wrath, and that wrath was poured out on him on the cross. God doesn't forget his wrath. Rather, he poured it out. That's this great word, “propitiation”, meaning that when God poured out his wrath on the Son, therefore when Christ says “it is finished”, his wrath has been satisfied. It has been poured out. The payment for sin is done. That's why when Jesus says “it is finished”—meaning, the righteous requirements of the law are finished. The righteous judgment that comes from the failure to obey the law has been satisfied. This is justification.

But then the beauty, the beauty of the work of God, is that that the means that when we receive Christ as Savior, that that righteousness which was Christ's is now given to us. It is imputed to us. We are then, in Christ, declared righteous. That's what Paul means—coheirs with Christ. All that is his is ours. He is the Son. We become sons and daughters. He is righteous. We are declared righteous. But that's justification. That's just one half of the double grace, that if this is what Christ has accomplished for us, then what do we receive? And that is the beauty of adoption. We become children. Children.

Now, this word, when Paul uses it here in Romans—he says that when we receive the spirit of adoption or the spirit of sonship, he's using a legal word that was used during that time for adoption. Now, adoption during that time was for the sake of providing for an orphan a means by which they would have an heir to be able to give their life to, but also that they might have parents. And this was a need to be able to prolong one's family line. It was largely seen as a legal act. Though Paul uses a very legal word, he uses it in a profoundly personal and tender way—because he says, “For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, ‘Abba, Father.’” The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. He doesn't just say, therefore we're children—he brings out the tenderness of it.

Now, you've heard it before—I recognize, perhaps, if you've been in church and you've heard this passage before, you've heard the word “Abba” is often translated as “Daddy.” While I have no particular objections to that, that's not the best translation. We actually don't have a good translation for it in English. That's as close as we can get. Something so incredibly personal, so close, that goes to the very heart of every woman and every man and every child. Whether we know it or not, we long to know that there is a Father who loves us unconditionally, who does not fail, who does not fall asleep. There is no shadow of his turning from us. Who does not forget his promises. For whom there is no darkness that his light cannot pierce. There is no corner that his comfort cannot reach. There is no loneliness that he cannot turn into fellowship. There is no sin that he cannot wipe clean. There is no distance that God

cannot bridge the chasm. Because in Christ, he calls you—you are my son, you are my daughter. And the best we can come up with is “Daddy.” But while it is so tender, it is also beyond imagination that Paul, a Jew, who would never have uttered the name “God” prior to his conversion, is now saying that in Christ we can not only call him God—we can call him Dad, Father, who loves me and gave himself for me.

Christian, if you sit here this morning and you believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and this truth has become distant for you, and you find your heart not enlivened, but cold—this is a day to be renewed in the beauty of the fact that your Father already knows that, and he calls you his own, and he wants to draw you near this morning. I wish I could sing. If I could, I would sing you a song. Because this week, I found this song. I really wish I could sing it, but all I’ve got are the lyrics. But it was such a picture of what God does for you, Christian, this morning. Written by Leon Bridges. New album, young man from Texas. If you listen to his music, there is no doubt in my mind that this man knows the Lord Jesus Christ. But it is not a Christian album. He wrote this song called “River”. Just a few of the lyrics. He says:

Been traveling these wide roads for so long
My heart’s been far from you
Ten-thousand miles gone

Oh, I wanna come near and give ya
Every part of me
But there is blood on my hands
And my lips aren’t clean

In my darkness I remember
Momma’s words reoccur to me
"Surrender to the good Lord
And he’ll wipe your slate clean"

Take me to your river
I wanna go
Take me to your river
I wanna know

Oh, I wanna come near and give ya
Every part of me
But there is blood on my hands
And my lips aren’t clean

Tip me in your smooth waters
I go in
As a man with many crimes
Come up for air
As my sins flow down the Jordan

Take me to your river
I wanna go
Take me to your river
I wanna know

Some of you this morning, you know the Lord, but you have traveled ten thousand miles gone, and your heart feels cold to him. Your Father invites you into the water again, for Christ has paid for all of it, and

our sins have flowed down the Jordan. Our sins are removed from us as far as the east is from the west, and he remembers them no more. It is finished. Come, my children, and call me by my name. And it is the Spirit that enables us to say, "Father." There is no sin that you bring here this morning that is unforgivable. There is no distance that he has not bridged. Come. Your Father invites you.

But there is more. From fear to freedom. Now, for some of you, what I just said still seems very distant to you, because perhaps you don't know the Lord—or perhaps you do. But there is a freedom that is promised here when he says, "For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.'" He wants to invite all of us from fear to freedom. He compares the two—the spirit of fear and the spirit of sonship.

What does he mean by the spirit of fear? The great theologian John Murray I think rightly understood it as this. He's talking about a dangerous disposition, a dangerous frame of mind, a spirit of mind that is so prevalent, that wants to push God to the margins. And what that looks like in every succeeding generation may be quite different, but there is a cultural and generational moment for our day that this dangerous disposition, this frame of mind, this spirit of fear, actually shows itself. And it is a spirit of mind that requires conformity, that somehow if we follow and conform to the ways of this mindset, we'll find freedom. But there is no real freedom in it—there's just slavish conformity. And here's the idea—here's the frame of mind—that either one, God does not exist, or two and equally worse, that religion is just self-defined, self-driven, and private.

There are many in this generation who believe that Christ or religion must simply be pushed to the margins and held only for the weekends, and only then for an hour and a half—that it's disconnected from the rest of our lives, that it's simply there to make you feel good about yourself. It's just a form of therapy. God just wants you to be happy. He wants you to be a good person. He wants you to be good to others. He wants you to somehow, really, just—if you need him, call him—but otherwise, you're good. Do the best you can.

If you don't believe me, that this is a spirit of our age, Christian Smith did a vast study, nationwide, in his book *Soul-Searching*, in asking emerging adults—and yes, that's an actual stage of life—emerging adults about this kind of frame of mind, that God is just there when we need him, and he simply wants us to be good, with the illusion that if we believe that, it will bring freedom. Over and over again—not just one interview, but thousands of interviews—this is what he saw and heard. He said:

Emerging adults are determined to be free, but they do not know what is worth doing with their freedom. They work very hard to stand on their own two feet, but they do not really know where they ought to go and why, once they are standing. They lack larger visions of what is true and real and good. Many know that there must be something more, and they want it. Many are uncomfortable with their inability to make truth statements and moral claims without killing them with a death of a thousand qualifications. But they do not know what to do about the given crisis of truth and values that seem to have destabilized them and the culture around them. And so they simply carry on as best they can as sovereign, autonomous, empowered individuals who lack a reliable basis for any particular conviction or direction to which to guide their lives.

The idea that we simply create our own destinies, our own direction, our own meaning, our own values, has the illusion of freedom, but really just makes us slaves to the conformity of this age, which really cannot deliver on the freedom that this mindset promises. Instead of being able to do whatever I want to do with my life, I find in my own generation and those who are younger than me—are finding themselves going, look at all the choices I have. But rather, find it a fearful thing to say yes to anything, because I'm afraid of what I might be saying no to. To stand on this truth means that I have to come up with a thousand reasons or a thousand qualifications. I'm afraid to utter the name of Christ, because if I do, it would mean I'm judgmental or unkind or narrow.

You see, conformity to this disposition is so dangerous, because it promises freedom, but in reality it is just slavish conformity to the spirit of the age, and it treats God as a lifeguard who's there to come along when we're drowning, when we need him, pop us out of the water, and we're okay. Thank you, God. Good to go. But talk about freedom—to go from fear of not going where to go and on what grounds to stand, God offers us freedom, and that freedom is becoming children. It is a journey to nonconformity. It is learning how to be a child again. Paul tells us here, when he says, “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children.” What is he telling us? It is the Spirit who enables. He’s the one who testifies. He’s the one who confirms. He leads, he prays, he mediates, on our behalf. It is the Spirit who leads us. It is the Spirit who empowers us. It is like the Father picking up the child by the hand, into his arms, enabling him to see, putting him on his shoulders to be able to see what he could not see for himself. The Spirit enables us to see who the Father is, and to see the vast vision for what it means to be human—it means to become a child, a child of a Father who loves us, who doesn’t want us to conform to this age or that age, but to know him as a loving Father.

Becoming a child is not just knowing the enabling Spirit who testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children—he also says, “Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ.” Becoming a child means learning what promises we receive—all the glory, all the beauty, all the incredible benefits that Christ has will be ours when we believe and find ourselves to be children of God who receive the gift of salvation. All the promises of Scriptures, it says, is yes and amen in Christ.

But, you know, if you remember, perhaps, if you heard the story last week of the surfer who, in the middle of competition, got attacked by a shark—never before in pro-surfing. I watched the video. I love watching pro-surfing. And Nick Fanning is a three-time world champion, great surfer. But when you walk that video, and you watch when he gets up onto the back of the jet ski, when he’s been rescued, he gets on his knees, and he’s just completely blown away by what just happened to him. And you’re caught up in the emotion. He’s done numerous interviews. But here’s the crazy thing. Those lifeguards are worthy of so much praise, and they did a great job, but I’ll guarantee you, not one of those people who rescued Nick Fanning will put Nick Fanning in their will. He will never inherit all that they have. They’re friends. They helped each other. But they’re not united. God wants to be more than a lifeguard. He’s our Father, who gives us the kingdom.

Finally, it means giving up and giving in. Becoming a child means giving up and giving in. When he says here, after he says we become coheirs with Christ, “if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.” To share in his sufferings means we need to give up, meaning we can’t just enter into this without saying no to self—no to our self-directed lives, coming up with our own agendas, believing we know what is right, being our own god. Because Christ gave up his glory that we might be united to him. To be united to Christ means giving up our life. But when we do, we receive life, because we give in, because the Lord draws us in and makes us his children.

This is what is on offer. This is the promise. This is the invitation. This is the drama of adoption. And the Lord says to each of us this morning, regardless of where you are in your journey with the Lord, or whether you know him or not—he invites us in. No matter how many miles you have traveled, no matter what crimes you are guilty of, he wants us to come in, and our Father will make us his children, wipe our slate clean, and we will know him as Abba, as adopted children. May the Lord do that in you. May he do that in us. And may God make us a community of children praising our Savior. In Jesus’ name, let’s pray.

Now, Lord, take this Word you have given us. May you write it on our hearts. May you call us to yourself and make us your children, that we might rest in learning what it means to be children. Lord, help us to give up and to give in. Lord, we thank you for what you have done for us in Jesus Christ and by your Spirit. We give you thanks and praise. In his name we pray. Amen.