

Romans 8: 14-17 Pastor Bill Uetricht 5.27.21 Holy Trinity

It was about 30 years ago that one of the 50 or so pastors in ELCA churches in Toledo stood up at a pastor's gathering and asked the other pastors if they knew of a family who might be open to adoption. Bev and I were considering such a life choice because her Mom had recently been diagnosed with Huntington's Chorea, a horrible disease that slowly but surely takes the life out of people, causing them to have dance-like movements, major loss of motor and brain function. It's a genetic disorder, so Bev could have had and could still have this disease. The only way to stop the disease is to stop having children. And we decided that this was what we were going to do and had just begun thinking about the prospect of adoption. We then got on the phone to call the pastor who had made the announcement at the meeting and *boom* the adoption process began. In a couple of weeks, we were told that a baby had been born. And when he was six days old, we picked Jacob up from Toledo hospital. And since then, he has been our son. Admittedly, the journey with him hasn't always been easy, but his life and our lives were forever changed . . . by adoption.

Adoption is Paul's concern today in Romans. He says, "For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption." In these words, Paul is speaking about adoption in light of the Romans experience with it. In that culture, parents had the option to disown a child for a variety of reasons. And many disowned children ended up living in the context of slavery. Adoption for the children meant that they were freely chosen and desired by their parents. They were thought to be a permanent part of the family. The children then had new identities. Any prior commitments or debts attached to those children were erased. They had a real sense of belonging, which wasn't mostly about emotional attachment, but economic security. They would become heirs, no

longer living in the midst of a slave's status, but as an integral part of the family.

This is the image that Paul uses to describe our status with God. We are given a place of belonging. We are freely chosen. The Spirit of God bears witness to our spirits that we are full children of God, and as such we are heirs, heirs with Christ. We get what he got: resurrection. We are not without a status. We are not without a place, not without gifts. We belong. We are secure. We are gifted with what we need to move into the future with courage and strength. We live with an intimacy with God that is God's gift to us. Paul says that we get to call God, "Abba," which is Aramaic for Dad, a more intimate name than Father. The relationship we are given is not a relationship of distance, but closeness. The belonging that we know is the belonging of close relationship, of intimacy.

There is much on Trinity weekend that could be said about the Trinity, including the sense that we get from our first reading for today of the bigness, grandness, or goodness of God. The Trinity, as Isaiah experienced in his call story, should make our jaws drop, should cause us to note our human inadequacy: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips." But the Trinity also, in almost a contrary way, should soak us in the intimacy of God. The Trinity is all about relationship. Even God, especially God, needs relationship. The Trinity tells us that God is relationship writ large, a reality that is telling for who we are and what our lives are to be about. The Trinity invites us into the intimacy of relationship with God, one another, and with everything that is. That's the kind of belonging that our adopted status gives us.

Now Paul wonders if that is indeed the status we have, why would many of us choose not to live within that status? Why would we want to live in a spirit of slavery, or as Paul puts it, why would we want to

“fall back into fear?” Slavery brings fear. Adoption brings security and strength. We were created in the image and likeness of God, and we say, “Oh no, not really.” We were freely brought into the family of God, chosen by God, and by the way we live our lives we suggest otherwise.

In the seventh chapter of Romans, one chapter prior to that which is our text for today, Paul speaks of the inner conflict that he knows—the conflict of not doing the good that he wants to do. He admits that because of sin, he himself is not capable of doing the good. He could have easily thrown in the towel at this point. But he doesn’t. He asks, “Who will rescue me from this body of death?” The response: “Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” The struggle with the self isn’t ultimately a promethean battle that we win via our strength and determination. The struggle with the self is often a matter of letting go. The victory isn’t ours to win; it is ours to receive.

Paul in Romans is mapping out a theology that sees life as not about achievement, accomplishment, or perfection. This approach to living he calls a life according to the flesh, which he claims ultimately leads to no good--death, he labels it. Life focused on achieving, accomplishing, securing, amassing is life that produces fear. Fear is what life is all about when you are constantly trying to earn your way, prove yourself, justify your existence. We do all kinds of crazy things when we live in the flesh. Often, life becomes all about us. We get busy trying to convince everybody else and mostly ourselves that we are okay. Our religion and our politics become about being right. Our family life, our homes, our jobs become looking good and impressing others. We hide the truth. We run from our insecurities and vulnerabilities. We live in fear, often turning God into a taskmaster before whom we cower because we can’t do enough to justify ourselves. This for Paul is a matter of returning to slavery.

But this is not who we are. We did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. But we have received a spirit of adoption. We have been chosen, which is what baptism is all about. We truly belong. We truly have a place, a place of great intimacy. Why would we want to abandon this place and return to a fear-driven life? Why would we want to live in slavery? There's no freedom there. Real joy evades us there.

Oh yes, don't get me wrong. Living as the adopted children of God isn't a picnic. Paul says as he speaks of us being joint heirs with Christ that this status involves pain as well as joy and security. When we live out of the intimacy that is our gift, as we cry "Abba," father, we know we our children of God, heirs of God, joint heirs with Christ, if--or probably better put *since*—we suffer with him. Intimacy entails a deep sense of belonging. And belonging includes the sharing of suffering and pain. When we are not busy proving ourselves, when we are not busy justifying our own existences, we are much more open to the pain of the world, not necessarily overcoming it, although sometimes that isn't a bad idea, but entering into it. To know your status as a loved, chosen child of God frees you to walk alongside other chosen, loved children of God, becoming a part of not only their joys but the suffering that makes life hard. When life is about proving yourself, you often run from your own vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of others. In Christ, there is great freedom, freedom to be real and really available to others.

Adoption changed the life of Bev and me and Jacob. Adoption changes all of our lives. In God in Christ, we have a place, we belong. We're secure. Our worth is not dependent upon our achievement, our status before others. It's gift. No reason, then, for us to pretend otherwise. No reason for us to draw back into slavery and fear. No reason for us not to live according to the Spirit—the Spirit of love and freedom.

