

Sermon #1,142: Romans 8:12-17

4-26-15 (Easter 4, Jubilate Sunday), Bethany-Princeton MN

Hymns: "Holy Spirit Hear Us," 438, 373; communion hymns 376, 378)

SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

The Text, Romans 8:12-17. ¹² Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, "Abba, Father." ¹⁶ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together.

Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Through Your Word convince us of what we have such a hard time believing, that You want us and You love us as Your own dear children, as Your adopted children whom You love and want. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, with whom we are, incredibly, joint heirs: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

This past week for the memorial service I struggled a little bit, when I was writing the obituary that I read during the service. It was about how to describe the beginning of Dale's life. He was adopted. We have a little trouble with adoption language. We distinguish between so-called *biological* parents – as if it's a science class -- and *adoptive* parents. We refer to stepfathers and stepmothers. Of course Disney has kind of ruined that for us with all their wicked stepmothers. We speak about step-families, blended families, and so on.

In the end I said: "*The loving God who gave Dale life also gave him, during his infancy, the gift of adoptive parents Roy and Hazel Wedell and sister Lois in 1954, to care and provide for him in a loving home and family.*" I did call them Dale's *adoptive* parents, simply to point out how he was given a loving home and family, and this was a gift to him from a loving God. His sister was also an adoptive sister. But to Dale she was just his sister, and they were his parents, not step-parents.

That is just beautiful when it is that way, and it is a picture of the Gospel, actually. Adoption has a lot to teach us about the Gospel. That is what St. Paul is doing in these verses of Romans 8. He teaches us what the Gospel is by using adoption language. He calls the Holy Spirit the **“Spirit of adoption.”**

But far from being confused about adoption like we tend to be, he does not trifle with whether this is real or not, the whole “are-they-your-real-children” question that adoptive parents get, or the whole “are-they-your-real-parents-or-are-you-adopted” line of talk that adopted children have to deal with.

In these verses there is so much family talk. St. Paul says, **“these are sons of God”** – not “adopted sons.” He speaks of crying out, **“Abba, Father,”** which in the Hebrew the Jews spoke then was a very affectionate term for “father,” almost like “Daddy,” a far cry from calling Him “stepfather.” He speaks of being **“children of God ... joint heirs with Christ,”** and he begins it all by addressing everyone as **“brothers.”** It’s all in cozy family terms: Father, children, brothers, sons. When you consider what adoption is, what circumstances in life bring the need for adoption -- homelessness, broken homes, a child who doesn’t have a family, or has somehow lost or been severed from a parent, parents who are childless and yearn for children – it’s beautiful that Paul uses no step-language!

What does all of this have to do with the Gospel, the Good News of Jesus Christ? Everything! For what is Jesus in His essence? He is a Son. The Son of God. The Bible calls Him the only Son of God, which may confuse us. Am I not God’s child? Not in essence. Because of being born sinful, all people are **“by nature the children of wrath” (Eph 2:3)**. But not Christ. In His essence He is God’s Son, He alone deserves to hear God say as a proud Father, **“This is My Son whom I love; in Him I am well pleased.”** For you to have this and hear this, to be in God’s family, what is necessary? Adoption. But He gives you such lofty status, calling you “sons” of God, and not second-rate but even “co-heirs” with Christ.

Now since it is God inspiring Paul to speak of these things, it is God who is using this language of adoption and sonship and inheritance. In fact, we know it is the Holy Spirit who breathed into the minds of the writers the thoughts to express and the words to use. The Holy Spirit who is revealed here to be the **“Spirit of adoption.”** But if you think about it, it is puzzling why He chooses to reveal Himself in adoption terms. Because it would seem to produce uncertainty.

For what is the fear of an adopted child? It is that someday the parent might not want him. Or that if the parents have other children whom they do not need to adopt, that they will love those children more than the adopted. Or that if the adopted child does some things that bring shame to the parents, or that the parents disapprove of, that they will be loved less. If the parent brought the adopted child home – a child who in some cases was given up by the parents who gave birth to him/her – might the adoptive parents decide to take the child back, or be the next parents to give him/her up? It is so, so easy for the adopted child to live with these fears. These fears are founded upon conditional love. They fear being rejected. They fear being separated from loving parents. They fear that the love will end, or that it wasn't real, or it won't last.

These are the thoughts that plague the Christian. How easy it is for you to think that God has children whom He loves more than you – just look how life is easier for others, or some people have more, or it is easier for some to have faith! How easy it is, in your shame and guilt, to think of the things you do that God is not well pleased with, to think of how you have brought Him shame, how you have wasted what He's given you, and isn't He bound to lose patience with you, to take away your guardian angels, to punish you in some way? How easy it is for you to fear being rejected by God, that His love for you will come to an end, or it won't last. How real the fear is that you will end up separated from Him for eternity, because you are not a good enough child, you don't live as His child.

The words here in Romans 8 seem to only confirm this, when St. Paul writes that **“as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.”** Our over-active conscience uses these words to accuse us. Do I have to gauge whether I am actually being led by the Spirit of God – if I am actually following where the Holy Spirit wants to lead me – in order to be identified as one of the sons of God? This is a function of the Law, and the Law will never give me any certainty that I am His child. In fact, the Law will condemn and tell me I am not.

But this is not what the Holy Spirit is doing in this passage. It is not a Law passage. He is not using the language of adoption to make us uncertain. He uses it to give us certainty! For God’s decree of adoption comes from the heavenly council. It comes from heaven, where everything is sure and certain. It comes to us on earth. When you are baptized, you are adopted into God’s family. This takes place on earth. The hard thing about this is that earth is where the devil is able to do things. In just a few weeks, four of our church’s youth will be confirmed. They will be reaffirming the promise of their baptism and their status as children of God. And the devil will continually try to make them unsure of this. Just as he said to Jesus, *“If You are the Son of God ...”* he will speak his if’s to them in their conscience, as he does to all of us. He will try to make them sell their inheritance like Esau. He’ll try to impress them with the glittering things of this world, to covet what seems important to the hordes of people in this world who act so enlightened but are walking in darkness and would lead them there.

So it is important for them to know – and for us all to know – about the adoption, where it comes from and what the home is really like. Think of what you know about adoption. An American family goes to Romania or Russia or China or India to an orphanage, where the children live in squalor, owning nothing, fighting for food, sitting in their own urine, drinking unhealthy water, never getting a good night’s sleep, vulnerable to every disease. They bring their child

home to the land of plenty and opportunity, where they have a comfortable bed, an insulated house, treated water, and good medical care, in short, to full health and prosperity, but most of all to people who will love them. Don't you think they say to their child – or at least think to themselves – *“That place is a pit! If you only knew what is waiting for you!”* And they can't wait to show it to them.

This is exactly like what God is doing, as He declares your adoption in these verses. Far from making you uncertain, He is giving you certainty that He wants you, He loves you, and He is taking you somewhere far better, among a family – a huge family, all the saints and all the angels – who will only ever love you. He can't wait to show it to you. And in fact He does show it to you, He sends His messengers, pastors, to show this forth to you in Word and Sacrament, to preach the message of grace to you, constantly to repeat to you the details of your adoption, to declare that you are God's child for sure and certain, that in Jesus there is no “if,” no *“God loves you if ...”* or *“you are God's child if ...”* but only *“God so loved the world that He sent His only-begotten Son,”* so in Christ His love for you does not end or run out, you have nothing to fear. As St. Paul writes:

“For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.”¹⁶ The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God,¹⁷ and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.”

This language has often been misunderstood. Some people think that when the Bible calls everyone – males and female – by the name “sons of God,” that this is prejudiced against women. But nothing could be farther from the truth. As we see with the term “heirs of God,” this is God using the tradition – a tradition He created – that the first-born son was the heir. So the term “sons of God” is taking the inheritance that by right belongs to the Son, Jesus, and giving it to every Christian – boy or girl, man or woman – giving each one this dignity.

Well, we say, of course Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, the first-born, He must receive more. He's the one without sin, you know. No! You are not only "**sons of God,**" but in case you don't get it He even calls you "**heirs of God,**" and then to make it even more clear He says that you are "**co-heirs with Christ.**"

Not lesser heirs than Christ. Not lesser shares. But just as much. Obviously you are not equal in *glory* with the Son of God. But everything He has because He Himself deserves it, He gives to you. You have it, you inherit it, by grace, by faith in Him. This is what the term "sons of God" means: everything He has, you have. In Him you are without sin. God is well pleased with you, for Jesus' sake. In Him you are God's child, God's heir, having the full rights of His sons. Everyone in this family has equal glory, equal dignity, equal riches ... and equal *joy*.

He is the Spirit of adoption, and all He wants for you is to hear, repeatedly, that you are God's child, until He brings you away from this pit, which is not your home, to the home where you no longer need to hear it anymore; you will only enjoy your true loving home and family, the family of God of which you are a most important member. Amen!