

Adopted By God

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—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. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

(Romans 8:12-25, NRSV)

As many of you already know, my wife Jennifer and I are going to adopt a child. We don't know what that child will look like or where he or she will come from, because for now, we are still in the process of filling out paperwork, having our fingerprints and background checked, meeting with social workers and dealing with all of the bureaucracy that precedes getting to adopt a child. We don't know anything about that child. We haven't seen that child. We are living in the meantime, a time of hope and impatient expectation for what will be.

Our scripture passage for today deals with living in the meantime, a time of hope and impatient expectation for what will be. In the eighth chapter of the epistle to the Romans, we find the apostle Paul in the middle of a twisted theological argument. Paul is trying to explain the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the significance of Christ as a solution for the fallen state of humanity and the coming time when all humanity will be a part of one family, whole and redeemed. It's a pretty tall order and Paul sort of gets there with a little bit of tangled reason—provided you're willing to stick with his argument.

To describe the inclusion of the Gentiles into the people of God, Paul uses the language of adoption. Since Jennifer and I have a vested interest in all things adoption-oriented, we have started watching a great TV series that airs Sunday nights on the

Hallmark Channel. It's called *Adoption*. Each week, for an hour, the viewer gets to learn about a set of adoptive parents, a child to be adopted and sometimes the birth mother of that child.

One of the most heart-warming things about the show is when they tell the story of an older child who has made her or his way through the maze of foster care to be adopted by a family. For the first time around, Jen and I have decided we want to adopt an infant, but we have kept open the option of adopting an older child the second time around. Our hearts go out to these children who have gone through their young lives without a family to care for them. The joy on their faces is astounding to witness, even through the medium of TV.

That joy is what Paul is describing when he writes that we possess “a spirit of adoption.” He contrasts this “spirit” with that of “a spirit of slavery.” This dichotomy of slave vs. adopted child is deliberate. In the Greco-Roman world, when someone was legally adopted, they received the full rights, rank and privileges due a child of that particular family.¹ (That's why the history books are full of Roman emperors adopting adult males to succeed them when their own offspring fail to pass muster. You may remember the scene in the movie *Gladiator* when the aging emperor, Marcus Aurelius chooses to adopt Russel Crowe's character, Maximus, because his own son is unworthy to succeed him.) By contrast, a slave possessed no rights, no rank and no privileges. Paul declares that we have been adopted by God and no matter what our previous status, in the household of God we are full heirs to all of the blessings and benefits therein.

It is difficult for us after almost 2000 years of Christian history to grasp the joy felt by those first Christians at being included among the people of God. In the churches Paul worked with, we find people of all different economic and social statuses, many of which were barred from full inclusion in society at large and their previous religions in particular. By becoming Christians, they discovered a world where the barriers of class, race and gender disappeared. Furthermore, the God of the universe cared especially for them—a dramatically foreign concept to their previous religions.

Furthermore, as Christians they fell heir to the rich lineage of Judaism. I will never forget my first day of class in my seminary Old Testament course. Dr. Ballentine lectured for over an hour on why we should dispose of the term “Old Testament” in favor of “Hebrew Bible.” At first, I thought it was strange, after all I had learned in Sunday School that you the Bible had two parts: the Old and the New Testaments. Was it mere political correctness to play around with words? As his lecture continued, I found that Dr. Ballentine began to make some real sense. As Christians we have fallen heir to a group of scriptures that belong to someone else. Calling the first part of the Bible, “the Hebrew Bible” helps us remember that we are lucky to get to use these writings. To call one group of writings “New” and the other “Old” implies that one is “new and improved” and the other is “older and somehow inferior.”

The history of the church is filled with holy wars, persecutions, inquisitions and genocides against Jews. We have forgotten the privilege and honor that those first

Christians felt at being included among the people of God. Instead of acting like the child glad to be adopted, we have acted like the spoiled rich kid. Instead of finding joy in being included among God's people, we have taken joy from excluding others.

Paul goes on in this passage to explain that as great as the newfound family of the church can be and as wonderful as the experience of Christ can be, it is only a foretaste of what is to come. What blessings we as Christians possess now are merely the first fruits of a much greater harvest. As Christians we look forward to a day when all tears are wiped away and the barriers that divide humanity into warring camps are demolished.

The apostle writes that all of creation has groaned as if in labor pains waiting for the "children of God" to appear. Who? The adopted children of God, that's who. Throughout the prophetic writings in the Hebrew Bible, we find images of a future when all nations shall worship God together in peace, when "the lion shall lay down with the lamb."ⁱⁱ Creation has been waiting for this like a mother giving birth to a child.ⁱⁱⁱ

As hard as it is to believe, Paul declares that the church is the beginning of this harmonious future. The church is supposed to be the place where there is "no slave nor free, male nor female, Jew nor Greek, for all are one in Christ Jesus."^{iv} All are adopted by God. At its better moments the church helps to ease the pain of our hurting world, but at its worst the church is the cause of much of that pain.

When the American church supported segregation and racism, Creation groaned from the pain. Yet when members of that same church came together to combat racism the pain eased.

When ministers are punished for participating in ecumenical services as we have seen recently in our area, Creation cries out in pain. But when the church strives to love and respect those who differ from us, Creation sighs with relief.

When a church excludes people, either through outright condemnation or polite coldness, because they are of a lower economic status, they are the wrong race or nationality, they are gay or lesbian, Creation suffers, the whole world is in pain. When a church seeks to include people of different classes, races, nationalities, sexual orientations and other varieties, the pain of our world decreases.

We say that we come together to worship one Lord and to share the same bread and the same cup during communion, but what kind of limits do we set—either spoken or unspoken—regarding who we will allow to sit at table with us? Will we include others as the grateful adopted children of God that we are or will we forget the grace shown to us?

Fred Craddock tells a story about a time when he realized he was taking communion but he wasn't in a church, a time when he experienced the inclusion that the church is supposed to practice but often does not.^v He tells of a time when he was invited to the University of Winnipeg in Canada to give some lectures. As he left the lecture hall with his host one night, they felt the first flakes of snow fall on them. They were

surprised, because the weather forecast had been mild. The host had written for Craddock to bring a light jacket because it was too early for winter weather.

The next morning, he awoke to find two or three feet pressed up against the door. The phone rang and when he answered, his host apologized and explained the lecture was cancelled and even he couldn't get out to take Craddock to breakfast. He told Craddock that there was a bus depot around the corner that had a small café, so Craddock said he would manage. He put on his small cap, but it didn't even warm his head in the room. So, he went to the bathroom unrolled some toilet paper and padded the hat so it would offer some warmth. He headed out the door already shivering in his windbreaker and toilet paper stuffed hat.

He made it to the bus depot café and found it filled with every stranded traveler in Canada. He finally found a spot and waited a long while before a man in a greasy apron approached him and barked, "What'll you have?" Craddock said, "May I see a menu?" The man replied, "What do you want a menu for? We have soup." Craddock said, "What kinds of soup do you have?" And he said, "Soup. You want some soup?" To which Craddock replied, "That's what I was going to order—soup."

The soup was delivered and Craddock lifted a spoonful to his mouth. Yuck! It was sort of gray and tasted horrible. He placed his hands around it because at least it was warm and lowered his toilet paper wrapped head bemoaning his cold and hungry fate.

About that time, the door opened to let in more freezing air. A slight woman walked in to jeers of "shut the door!" She found a place to sit and greasy apron came over. "What do you want?" "A glass of water," she answered. He brought it to her and took out his pad. "Now what'll you have?" "Just the water," she said. He said, "You have to order, lady." "Well I just want the water." "Look, I have customers that pay—what do you think this is, a church or something?" "Now what do you want?" She said, "Just a glass of water and some time to get warm." "Look, there are people that are paying here. If you're not going to order, you've got to leave!"

She got up to leave, and almost as if rehearsed, everybody in that little café stood up and started toward the door. Craddock got up too and thought to himself, "I'm voting for something here; I don't quite know what it is." When the greasy apron saw all of his customers leaving, he gave in and said, "All right, all right, she can stay." Everyone sat down as he brought her a bowl of soup. Craddock turned to the guy next to him and asked, "Who is she?" He said, "I never saw her before."

The place got quiet except for the sipping of soup. Craddock looked down and decided to try it again. This time around it didn't seem so bad. It seemed like pretty good soup. He didn't know what was in it, but as he ate it he seemed to taste ever so faintly bread and wine. Just a little bit of bread and wine.

ⁱ For a helpful discussion of adoption in the Roman world, see Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992), especially pages 112-113.

ⁱⁱ Isaiah 11:6-9

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a common image in the prophetic writings. For example: Isaiah 13:8, 21:3, 31:8, 42:14, 66:8; Jeremiah 4:31, 6:24, 13:21, 22:23, 48:41, 49:22, 50:43; Micah 4:9-10, 5:3.

^{iv} Galatians 3:28

^v Fred Craddock, a minister in the Christian Church and retired Professor of Homiletics at Candler School of Theology in Atlanta, possesses a masterful gift for storytelling. I paraphrase this story from a collection, *Craddock Stories* by Fred Craddock. This volume is edited by Mike Graves and Richard Ward and is published by Chalice Press.

Rev. Chase Peeples
The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York
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Pastoral Prayer

God of love and grace, we are grateful of the way you have included us in your family. Help us to act as grateful adopted children rather than spoiled brats who love to exclude others. Help our church to be a place that accepts all people and rejoices at their inclusion. Make us into a community that provides humanity with a foretaste of the peace and love that is coming in your future kingdom. Amen.