

“Adopted Children of God”

Romans 3:19-28

Webster’s dictionary defines the word “adopt”. “To choose and bring into a certain relationship; to take into one’s own family by legal process and raise as one’s own child.”

Galatians 4 defines “adoption” this way: “When the time had fully come God sent forth his Son to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters.” Again in Romans 8. When we cry, “Abba! Father!” it is the spirit herself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children then heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ.

We are the adopted children of God. This morning’s second lesson from Romans 3 explains how and why that adoption came about.

As soon as God decided to take a hand in history, he had to start somewhere. What he elected to start with was Israel. He adopted the people of Israel as his own children. This adoption had been a constant source of dismay, delight, and embarrassment to them both ever since. The story of the first few thousand years of their stormy relationship as father and adopted child is contained in the Old Testament.

Many times, Israel asked the question of why God adopted them of all people. The answer they kept coming with was that God adopted them for a terrible responsibility. At first the adopted people of Israel saw this responsibility as obeying the laws God had laid down for them in the Ten Commandments and in other parts of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. But Israel was never very good at obeying those laws their father had given them.

So, their father sent them prophets who told them it was also their responsibility to suffer and die for the world. None of them wanted to suffer and die very much, including Jesus, but Jesus did it anyway. It was only afterward that people began to understand why this was necessary. Why Jesus had to suffer and die for the world and then people tried to explain it. When Jesus died, something happened in the lives of certain people that made explanations unnecessary and yet people still tried to explain it.

One such attempt to explain what happened in Jesus is this text from Romans 3. Paul is trying to explain to the Romans, that they too, even though they are Gentiles, are adopted children of God.

Paul teaches them that God had first adopted the people of Israel. Their relationship as father and adopted child was based on the laws that God had communicated to them. The law was to help God's children see their sin, to become conscious of it. But the problem with a parent-child relationship based only on how successful the child obeys the laws set down by the parent, is that there is only judgment.

Yes, laws are necessary to make us aware of sin, but we can never be justified by works of the law because of our sin, our disobedience.

God being new in the business of parenting, realized this. The more laws he laid down, the more his children disobeyed and rebelled. A relationship between parent and child based solely on law was doomed to failure and disappointment for both the parent and child.

So, God the father acted, and he acted decisively to bring about a new relationship between himself and his children. Paul described this act of God in verses 21 and 22. "But now God's way of putting people right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do

with law, even though the law of Moses and the prophets gave their witness to it. God puts people right through their faith in Jesus Christ.”

God the father has intervened in a new way. He has established a new relationship with his children. Before there was only the law which served to make us aware of the power of sin as a power which grabs us and gets inside us, separating us from our father.

But now there is a new power that Paul calls the “righteousness of God” that is available to all of God’s children who believe in Jesus Christ. A power that has its source in God and comes to his children, to us through our faith in Jesus. A power that grabs us and gets inside us where it battles with the power of sin. A battle is fought inside of us every day between the power of sin and the power of righteousness.

This is the battle that Martin Luther was so very much aware of. He suggested we stand in front of a mirror at least once each day and repeat, “I am baptized . . .” to help defeat the power of sin in the battle raging inside of us. It is Martin Luther who wrote “A Mighty Fortress Is Our God” to describe that battle between the power of righteousness and the power of sin. Listen to the words that he writes: verses 2 and 3 . . .

No strength of ours can match his might!
We would be lost, rejected.
But now a champion comes to fight,
whom God himself elected.
You ask who this may be?
The Lord of hosts is he!
Christ Jesus, mighty Lord,
God's only Son, adored.
He holds the field victorious.

Though hordes of devils fill the land
all threat'ning to devour us,
we tremble not, unmoved we stand;

they cannot overpow'r us.
Let this world's tyrant rage;
in battle we'll engage!
His might is doomed to fail;
God's judgment must prevail!
One little word subdues him.

For whom is God the father a mighty fortress? Paul tells us in this Romans text. “For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift. It was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies all who have faith in Jesus. For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works of law.”

So rather than discarding his sinful and rebellious children of Israel; he offers them and all other children the gift of grace. Now through God’s action in Jesus we all become the adopted children of God. We can all be in a parent-child relationship with God that is no longer based solely on law and judgment.

Now, because of God’s action in Jesus, our relationship with God can be based on the love and grace God gives to us as a gift. The righteousness of God, the grace of God that comes to us, grabs us, gets inside of us, and grows daily as it defeats the power of sin.

No matter what we did and no matter what we do, we are sinners who frustrate God our father. We continually break the law no matter how hard we try. Our father has adopted us anyway. He loves us even when we don’t love him back. Our father accepts us even though we do not fulfill his intentions for us. Our father forgives us even when we continue to break the laws he has given us. Our father loves, accepts, and forgives us as his adopted children because of our faith in our father’s son, Jesus Christ.

It is Reformation Sunday. The reformation Martin Luther initiated within the catholic church was characterized by this central concept of “justification by grace through faith”. Luther was rebelling against the “works righteousness” that was evident in parts of the catholic church that had become corrupt. Priests were selling what were known as “indulgences”, pieces of paper that assured your passage out of purgatory and into heaven.

When I was visiting Elaine Quint last summer in Parma Hospital dressed in black with a clergy shirt; a young doctor walked in assuming I was a catholic priest. I told Elaine, “It’s time for me to go, let us know when you get out of here”. The doctor responded, “Elaine you must think you’re in purgatory being here”. I looked at the doctor and said, “Elaine’s a Lutheran, she’s going straight to heaven”. He looked mystified as I turned and walked out.

Luther used texts like this one from Romans 3 to say there is nothing we can do to be justified. (Buying a piece of paper will not help). We cannot earn our salvation. Rather it comes to us as a gift as a result of our faith. It is free. It cannot be earned. God chooses us and then we respond with faith and good works.

Once again Divinity has responded to our faith in Jesus Christ. We are sponsoring an Afghan refugee family who arrived in Cleveland two weeks ago. They have survived a harrowing journey. Because the father had been working with us during the war, they were brought into the Kabul airport for one of the flights out at the end of August. The parents and 6 children between ages 14 and 6 months were brought to one of our U.S. military bases to be vetted while living in large tents. Then they were brought to Cleveland, one of ten cities where there is already an Afghan population.

They were assigned to the Hope Center for Refugees and Immigrants which is directed by Eileen Wilson, sister of our own Marie Marvin. Eileen gave the sermon here the last weekend in August, giving us an update as refugees were being flown out. Eileen was here on Tuesday night giving a large group of us a 2½ hour training to prepare us for sponsoring our family. Another Afghan couple with 1 child had moved into the 2 story house near Metro Hospital. On Wednesday night, Bob Hollis, Paul Klemme, and myself met Eileen at the house. I was carrying donated coloring books, crayons, and children's books. While Paul and Bob were measuring for a washer and dryer, I sat in the living room with the children teaching them how to color and having them repeat the colors of the crayons after me.

Their 8 year old daughter, the size of my grandsons, kept giving me this huge, beautiful smile with a glint in her eyes. She immediately stole my heart. I could see and feel the presence of God in that living room on Wednesday night.

The women have been washing the clothes by hand and hanging them on the front porch railing to dry. We are buying them a washer and dryer out of the refugee fund. If you want to help support this family, make a check out to Divinity and write refugee fund in the memo. This is the beginning of at least a 1 year commitment to help them adapt to a culture extremely different from where they came. We will keep you updated.

There must be faith before good works. And good works cannot be described by what we do not do but what we do for the people around us. Servanthood. Stewardship. What we do is most important, not what we don't do.

In the midst of our institutions like government, business, and school which are often based on status, competition, and judgment; God has carved out a unit called the family.

The family gives us the opportunity to put God's values into practice. The values of love, acceptance, and forgiveness which often run counter to the values of society.

When we realize God has adopted us as his children and that Jesus has provided us with a glimpse of the Kingdom of God, then we can learn from our relationship with a loving, accepting, and forgiving God. And we can pass on that knowledge and faith in how we parent our children so they can pass it on to their children. Let us not accept the values of society based on competition and status. Let us not succumb to the power of sin. Let the righteousness of God grow inside of us and in our relationships with our parents and our children.

We pray that Divinity will be a community of believers where you can live out your faith; as the "righteousness of God", "the peace of God", grows inside each of you in the years ahead.

May the peace of God . . .

#504 – A Mighty Fortress Is Our God