

Becoming Like Children

A Sermon on Romans 8:12-17 and John 3:1-17 by the Rev. Philip Major
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We are delighted to be gathered together as one body with sisters and brothers from our 8 and 10 a.m. congregations today. The idea of us being brothers and sisters in Christ is one of the themes of today's passage from the book of Romans. Before looking at the passage in detail, let's take a minute to recall the main themes of Romans.

The first theme of Romans has a strong gardening allusion, which makes it one of my favorites; Gentile Christians are being grafted onto tree of faith of Abraham. There are places in Romans where Paul gives some stern warnings; they are not directed toward Jews but to his audience: the Gentile followers of Christ. For us Gentiles, feelings of superiority and pride are misplaced. Humility is the faithful response for us who are being grafted onto the tree of Abraham.

The second theme of Romans has to do with Paul's time, which was very much like our own. There was lots of movement of peoples around the ancient world. There was a great amount of instability and growth. Many people were searching for the next best thing. If there had been bookstores in Paul's lifetime, the self-help aisle would have been very popular. Many people were joining different religious groups in pursuit of the newest, best ideas for obtaining mastery over their lives. Paul second theme is that being a disciple of Christ is not a self-help method.

The Christian life is not about you and me mastering our lives. According to Paul, the Christian life is about us giving up some part of ourselves so God might bring reconciliation, which is actually the third theme of Romans. Just as God has accommodated Godself to all people through the person of Christ Jesus, so also we must accommodate ourselves to one another, and thus be reconciled with one another. These three ideas are the foundation for today's passage from Romans.

Our passage begins with a theme that surfaces repeatedly in Paul's letters. *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.* Many of us have heard two terrible, incorrect interpretations of this and similar passages in Paul's letters. The first incorrect interpretation is that Paul was critiquing the Jews, as ones who live according to the flesh. The second misinterpretation is that Paul was saying the physical aspects of life, eating, working, exercise, and physical intimacy, are bad.

Paul is not making either of these arguments. Paul's words about the flesh and life in the Spirit come from the primary conflict he faced. Paul's mission was to bring the Gospel of the Jewish messiah to the Gentiles. For Paul, this mission was about spiritual conversion. Paul's mission was to help the Gentiles follow the Jewish messiah's example by spiritually accommodating ourselves to one another. Paul was urging Gentiles to follow Christ's spiritual example of humility and self-emptying.

But Paul was not the only person bringing the message of Christ to the Gentiles. There were competing, travelling preachers roaming around the ancient Mediterranean world. Like Paul, these travelling preachers were Jewish followers of Christ. Unlike Paul, their primary message to the Gentiles was to conform to the physical aspects of the Jewish faith. According to them, women would have to obey the Jewish purity laws and men would have to be circumcised.

Paul addressed this false understanding of the Gospel repeatedly, in Romans 2, in Philippians 3, and in the letter to the Galatians. Near the end of Galatians Paul refers to the competing travelling preachers, saying *"they want you to be circumcised so that they may boast about your flesh. May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ...for neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything."* This is the

context for Paul's constant concern that the followers of Christ should not pay attention to 'the flesh', but seek to be spiritually converted.

Paul's concern for spiritual conversion, rather than physical practices, leads him to expand on a theme articulated by Jesus. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says, *no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit.* Like Paul, Jesus was urging people to be spiritually converted, to empty part of themselves in order to be accommodated to God and to one another. Jesus was arguing against the idea that status in the religious community is based on one's heritage, or practices of circumcision and other purity laws. Jesus was arguing against those who felt entitled because of their gender, or education level, or their standing in the community, or the status of their biological parents. He urges his followers to set aside the entitlement and status that were associated with one's tribe or family, and to take on God's spirit of reconciliation and service to others.

Paul is making a similar argument in Romans 8: *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.* Paul is urging the Gentiles to take on a spirit of adoption, and in humility to be adopted as God's children. *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.*

Our translation conveys the idea of us, consenting to be adopted as God's children. But in Paul's original language there is a beautiful idea we might miss, the idea of mutuality. The text says that if we are children of God *then we are also heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.* In Paul's Greek he literally says, *We are co-heirs with Christ if, in fact, we co-suffer with Christ, so that we may also be co-glorified with Christ.* Paul is urging the Gentile Christians to take on a spirit of adoption, which means to follow Christ's way of reconciliation and mutuality.

These ideas of reconciliation and mutuality were new ideas. They were not easy ideas for the Christians in Rome to understand and accept. Even for us, 2000 years later, they are difficult for us. Paul encourages us to take on a spirit of adoption, to empty out some part of ourselves, that we might live in humility as children, adopted by God.

Receiving a spirit of adoption means putting aside our ways of seeking to dominate, manipulate, and rule over others. Receiving a spirit of adoption means setting aside our ways of hierarchy and judgments and fighting and bickering. We are to set them aside so we might enter into relationships of mutuality, that we might co-suffer with Christ, that we might be co-heirs with Christ. We take on a spirit of adoption, that we might live as children of God.

This is what we are doing, right now, by setting aside a part of our day, by emptying our lives of this 75 minutes of free time. Each time we come to this place for worship, we are saying, "I don't have all the answers." "My way isn't the right way." "I know that I am wrong and only God's grace and love will save me."

You and I are taking on a spirit of adoption by being here, and joining together in worship. Each time we ask for God's grace and wisdom to heal us and make us whole, we are taking on a spirit of adoption. Each time we treat each other as sisters and brothers in Christ, we are taking on a spirit of adoption.

It's not always easy for us to treat one another as sisters and brothers. It's not always easy for us to take on a spirit of adoption. As with many things in life, we might learn much about the spirit of adoption from the children. Here is a little story of what I have learned from the children in my life.

As you may know, I live in a large, blended family. You might say there is an awful lot of adoption going on in my family. My wife and I are both widows, and we were married five years

ago. The four children from our first marriages are gradually melding into a new, joyful, rich family. Slowly but surely, our adult children are adopting one another as true brothers and sisters.

Kathy's son, Andrew, is the eldest of our four children. Andrew has two children of his own. Andrew was separated and divorced six years ago, and he has been the primary caregiver for his two children for most of their lives. About a month before Kathy and I got married, it finally dawned on me that I might be the only grandfather these children would ever have.

The picture got to be even more complicated a few years after Kathy and I got married. Four years ago, in kindergarten, Andrew's son and a little boy became best friends. Month after month, year after year the two boys went to visit each other on Saturdays and Sundays, always with the parents and younger siblings tagging along. Now the boys are in fifth grade and are still best friends, but they don't have to drag their parents and younger siblings along on play dates because these two families, headed up by a divorced mom and a divorced dad, basically adopted each other. The mom and the dad love each other very much, but I am pretty sure that the children were the ones who first received and practiced a spirit of adoption. The four children were the ones who started treating each other like brothers and sisters, long before their parents began to think of them as brothers and sisters.

Two years ago, these two families moved into one big house together. There are five bedrooms, enough for one for every child. But the children refused to sleep in separate bedrooms. The four children were filled with a spirit that is concerned with joy rather than entitlement. They were not concerned with what they might deserve based on their parents or their status in the family. The four children put four mattresses in one room and slept all together, all in one room. Every once in a while, one of the parents will look in the room as they are sleeping. Sometimes, two of the children will be sleeping next to each other, holding hands. They are true brothers and sisters. You might think of it as a spirit of adoption, or a spirit of mutuality.

It's a little harder for us adults, and the challenges we face are sometimes more complicated, but we can try. Four years ago, during the worst weeks of the pandemic, my daughter Eleanor moved into our house. Kathy hadn't technically adopted Eleanor, but Eleanor gradually made it clear she was in some way adopting Kathy as a parent. Two years ago, her partner and soulmate, Erin, moved into our house. We tried to not have many expectations. We tried to allow a spirit of adoption to grow in our lives. Now, for both me and Kathy, it's like we have two daughters living with us.

The spirit of adoption in your life might not be nearly so dramatic as this. Receiving the spirit of adoption doesn't necessarily mean have a bunch of extra people living in your house or coming to your dinner table. But receiving God's spirit of adoption will be life changing for you. It's about openness and being willing to set aside expectations. It's about being willing to care for others in ways that are healthy and bring wholeness.

Jesus said, "Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." So we strive to follow the example of the children, setting aside feelings of pride and entitlement and allowing God's spirit of adoption to grow in our lives. We strive to become like children, seeking joy and relationships of trust and mutuality among God's children, these ones who are like sisters and brothers to us.