

You Are a Child of God  
Romans 8:12-17  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
May 27, 2018  
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The first week that the group of young people who were preparing for baptism this spring met I asked them to fill out a sheet about themselves. At the top there was a place for their name and then several lines that simply said, “I am” with a blank space behind those two words. We used this as a way to talk about who we are and to get to know each other more deeply. At the end of that exercise, after each person had shared their answers, I asked them all to write one more thing on their paper.

I asked them to write these simple words, “I am a child of God.”

And what important words they are.

In a world where loneliness runs high, where people feel less and less connected, where people find themselves often physically and even emotionally distanced from those they know best, where concerns about mental illness and suicide especially among children and teens are rising, it is so important that we hear affirmation of our belonging again and again.

And who better to belong to than God? Who better to be claimed by than God?

Robert Frost, in the poem “The Death of the Hired Man” wrote “about Old Silas, an unreliable farmhand who, though no longer welcome, returned to a certain farm to die. The farmer’s wife said he had come home, but the farmer said that because Silas had left when he was most needed, he was certainly not returning to a place he could call home. His wife countered, ‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.’”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, “Homiletical Perspective on Romans 8:12-17” in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 41.

When we read the passage from Romans today we are reminded again that in God we have a place to call home...a place to which we can always return...a place where we will always be taken in.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost – the Jewish festival that took on new meaning for the early followers of Jesus as the promised Spirit arrived on the scene and moved in such ways that the community grew, not just numerically, but grew in diversity as the Spirit connected people from different lands and languages, as the Spirit broke down structures of hierarchy between men and women, slaves and free.

That same Spirit appears in our text today. The Spirit shows up as the one who directs us toward God, who connects us to God, who with us claims our identity as children of God.

And just imagine if we really embraced this identity. What would it mean for us to live as children of God?

See, so often, we in the Christian faith, have kept this language for Jesus. We have spoken of Jesus as the son of the God. The Church has spent years developing an understanding of who Jesus is in relationship to God. But all too often we leave ourselves out of the picture. All too often we think only of the rest of we humans as lowly people who live lives much more distant from God. All too often we think only of ourselves as those caught up in the struggles and strains of this world, rather than recognizing the gift that we are given in our identity as God's children.

But in these verses Paul reminds us that God has chosen us. See, that's what adoption is. It is chosen-ness...it means that even though God didn't have to, God opted in...God decided not to exist outside of relationship with us...God made us a priority. And in this chosen-ness we are invited into the intimacy of relationship with God that we see in the stories of Jesus.

You might remember earlier in the year when we talked about the Lord's Prayer. The very first week we looked at it, we talked about the significance and meaning of how Jesus addressed God. Unfortunately, because time and language often change meaning, we who read it in the English language often miss the intimacy in this prayer. When we pray, "Our Father," in our life and times we might hear this as an address to a distant parent, to an unchallenged authority sitting on a throne somewhere. We might hear this as a hesitant address offered up with hopes that the holy parent is in the mood to talk or to receive our request. And yet, if we look at the original language, the word Jesus used, the name he called God was "Abba" and there is nothing distant about that title. Rather "Abba" is a term of intimacy, it carries the meaning and emotion that we might better hear when we say mommy or daddy. When Jesus prayed to "Abba" he prayed to the one with whom he shared intimate relationship, the parent in whose lap he could climb for comfort or reassurance, the one who loved him unconditionally.

And not only did Jesus teach his followers – us included – to pray in that way, but here in Romans we are again reminded that we have "the right to address God with [that] same title."<sup>2</sup> We are claimed by God in such a way that God not only endures our desire for intimacy, but God wants it as well. God wants to be the one to whom we go, the one who is our first instinct, the one with whom we share our lives and the one in whose ways we work to walk and to live.

One other Sunday recently I showed a picture of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You might remember that the most basic thing – the first thing that must be taken care of in order for us to be able to engage anything else in life – is our physiological needs, things like food and water and shelter. The second thing that we need is safety and security. And the very next thing

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<sup>2</sup> Eberhard, 40.

on Maslow's hierarchy is love and belonging. Only when we feel like we belong can we then go on to have confidence, to achieve, and to make a difference in this world.

While Paul wasn't privy to the work of Maslow, it seems that even he knew the difference that belonging makes. Even he knew that when people feel deeply connected – in this case to the very God who created them – then they are more likely to live a fuller life and to live more fully out of God's heart.

So, what would happen if we all started living as God's children? What would happen if we lived in the confidence of God's love and with the knowledge that God desires to be close to us?

Some of us get caught up in texts such as the one we heard today that talk about the tension between flesh and spirit. We get caught up in what that means and in trying to make a list of how much time we spend giving in to the flesh. We get caught up acting as if this text is against the body, talking about "sins of the flesh." And yet when we do that we miss an important message, because that doesn't seem to be the focal point of today's reading. In fact, it's not about telling us the body is bad but rather talking about a distinction between the ways of the world and the ways of the spirit. And even then, rather than asking us to make a list of the ways we give into flesh versus the ways we choose to live in the spirit, this text reminds us *that* we are claimed...*that* we are loved...*that* we are given permission to live fully into our identity as children of God. As Eberhard Busch writes, "We are children of God, not because of a decision we make about the flesh or the Spirit, but because...we are God's adopted children. That we are beloved children of God invites gratitude..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> J. Barney Hawkins IV, "Pastoral Perspective on Romans 8:12-17" in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3* (Louisville:Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 42.

So, again I ask: what would our world look like if we lived this way? Who would we become if we really believed in our own value and our own chosen-ness? How would we communicate, how would we love, how would we create community if we looked at each other person and saw them as children of God as well? How would we learn to appreciate our differences if we understood that we all belong to God just as we are?

What would happen if we chose each day to live as who we are – as children of God – reflecting the light and love of God more clearly, sharing the compassion and justice of God with the world, believing in the power of God’s love and our love to change the world?

What if we lived so fully as children of God that we looked like Christ? What if we lived with the same values and priorities that we see in the stories of Jesus? What if we lived, not as those caught up in the ways of this world, but as brothers and sisters with each other and of the one who showed us so clearly how to live God’s love?

And so today I remind you. You are a child of God. And you are invited to live fully into that identity. You are invited to live in gratitude, knowing that you are never outside of the reach of God. And you are invited to live in community knowing that just as God’s loves and chooses you, so God loves and chooses all people.

Amen.