

The Joy of Adoption

December 29, 2002 – 1st Sunday after Christmas
Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passage – Galatians 4:1-7(NRSV)

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; ²but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. ³So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. ⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

Finding the Joy

Are you happy? Are you joyful? From time to time, many of us can find it pretty hard to find the joy in life. In today’s scripture, Paul points us toward the true joy – the joy of being one of God’s children, bound into an intimate relationship with our Creator. However, this is not an easy-to-understand passage and grasping its power requires a little background and context, so we are going to unpack these few sentences.

The Law

In the Bible, the “law” refers to the instruction that God gave the Jews about how to live in right relationship with him. The law embodied the responsibilities of God’s people under the covenant God had made with them. The Ten Commandments were an expression of the law. Jesus said that the law could be summed up in the requirements to love God and neighbor.

Following the God of Israel meant putting yourself under the law. If a person kept the Jewish law, then they were Jewish. The law is what marked the Jews out from the peoples around them. To the Jews, the law was both a joy and a burden. It was a joy in that God himself had told them how to live! The burden was that the Jews knew that they really couldn’t do it. After all, who can truly and completely love God and neighbor?

Paul’s Word-Pictures

In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul uses two images to talk about the law and its place prior to Jesus. First, he depicts the law as a jailor, who locked up the prisoners and kept guard over them until Jesus came to liberate them. Paul also pictures the law as a custodian, who took care of God’s children, showed them how to live, and disciplined them.¹

Moving into chapter 4, which today’s passage begins, Paul mixes two metaphors. Paul begins with the image of an heir. Then, as now, fathers would set up estates for their children and appoint guardians or trustees who would control the estate until the children had come of age. Unlike today, under Roman law, children with a guardian had the legal status of a slave. In Paul’s metaphor, it is God the Father who

Letter to the Galatians

This is a letter written by Paul in the early 50’s AD to young Christian churches in Galatia, an area in modern-day Turkey. Paul had founded these churches and had brought them the message of “Jesus Christ crucified” (3:1). The Christians in these churches were Gentiles, that is, not Jewish. Evidently, some Jewish-Christians had come to the churches and begun to teach that in order to enter fully into God’s people, these Gentile Christians must first become Jewish, by adopting Jewish practices and following Jewish law, such as circumcising the males. When Paul learned of these rival teachers, he wrote this angry and passionate letter. Paul makes it very clear that, with the coming of Jesus Christ, obedience to God’s law is not a condition of entering into covenant membership in God’s people. Rather, people are put right with God through Jesus’ faithfulness on the cross. For Paul, all that God asks of us is that we place our trust in Jesus’ sacrifice.

¹ From C.B. Cousar’s commentary on Galatians in the *Interpretation* series.

has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who has lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law², bound to the “elemental spirits of the earth” (v. 3).

But . . . in an act of cosmic significance, God has intervened . . . the time has been fulfilled . . . the minors have become of age . . . the slaves have been freed! How could this be? Paul explains to the Galatians that God has sent his own son – quite human (born of a woman) and quite Jewish (born under the law) – who has “redeemed³” humanity, so that everyone might be adopted as God’s children. Here, Paul introduces his second metaphor, that of adoption. This becomes a little clearer when we remember that Paul is writing to Christians who had not been Jewish; the adoption language would have been especially meaningful for them – as it is for us. Jewish-Christians would have seen themselves as having received their inheritance by birth. Paul makes clear that Gentile-Christians could claim adoption into God’s family . . . a slave to a child (adopted or otherwise) to an heir! Whether born a son or adopted as a son, Paul sees no distinction before God. By sending his Son to free us from our prison, God has brought both Jew and Gentile into his newly-created family.

Experiencing Our Adoption

This “legal” adoption is not the end of the Paul’s story. God sent his Holy Spirit to us as the sign and pledge of our adoption into God’s family. As Cousar writes, “Just as an orphan taken into the home of foster parents may initially mistrust or at least wonder about the reception given by the new parents and may require some gesture to get over the feelings of being an outsider, so God’s adopted children move about in fear until the Spirit operates at a deep level ‘in our hearts’ to corroborate not once by repeatedly the reality of the Father’s love.” It is striking that Paul uses the Aramaic word, “Abba,” and striking that the early church preserved the original Aramaic as the writings of the New Testament were preserved and passed on. Clearly, we are to understand and find great joy in the intimate relationship we enjoy with God. God’s Spirit helps us to overcome the timidity of newly adopted children and enables us to pray to God in this most intimate way.

Abba!

This word has a meaning other than the name of an ever-popular Swedish pop group! In Aramaic, the dialect Jesus spoke, “abba” means father, or, in our vernacular, poppa or daddy. It denotes childlike intimacy and trust, but not disrespect. It is an intimate term in the family. Though Jews did sometimes use “heavenly Father” to refer to God, they would never have used “abba.” The fact that Jesus and Paul both used it reveals something to us of the intimate nature of the relationship between God and his children.

There are a couple of points that we need to remember when we use the term “father” to refer to God. This has nothing to do with the male gender. Jews and Christians have always understood that God’s nature transcends human gender. God is neither male nor female. Calling God “Father,” as in the Lord’s prayer, refers to God as the provider and the one who cares for his family, his people, his children. God is the one, the Father, who has provided for the inheritance we have received.¹

¹from Richard Hays’ commentary on Galatians in the *New Interpreter’s Bible*.

The Holy Spirit helps us to experience the joy of being heirs to God’s kingdom, of being in an intimate and very personal relationship with the creator of all that is. If we will keep our eyes on God and cultivate our relationship through prayer, study, and action then we will find the joy that God desires for us all.

Next Week

Next Sunday, we will celebrate Epiphany, the coming of the wise men to worship the infant Jesus. However, they quickly run into Herod, who, rather strangely, fears this baby. A king is born, but a king is already here! Matthew’s story (2:1-12) prepares us for the story of Jesus’ life: rejection by the Jewish leadership and acceptance by Gentiles who seek him.

² There is a larger sense of the law as well. Paul understood that the essence of the law is written on the hearts of all people; that our consciences tell us to love the Creator and one another (see Romans 1:18-32). Thus, in the larger sense, Paul can speak of all humans being slaves under the law.

³ In the Old Testament, there were kinsmen redeemers who would buy back relatives from debt and slavery. The Lord God Almighty is portrayed as the redeemer of Israel, delivering Israel from its enemies. Jesus Christ is never referred to as the Redeemer. Instead, Jesus is the means of our redemption from sin. The biblical language of redemption is all bound up with slavery and freedom, bondage and deliverance.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 119: 1-16 The delights of God's law.</p>	<p>Day 2 Galatians 3:1-14 Paul challenges the Galatians to remember, and embrace, what he taught them. Abraham is a model of faith.</p>
<p>Day 3 Galatians 3:23-29 The law imprisons.</p>	<p>Day 4 Galatians 4:8-11 Don't give up Christ and slip back into slavery under the law!</p>
<p>Day 5 Galatians 5:13-26 What it means to live freely in the Spirit.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

