

*Genesis 22:9-14 (NRSV)*

<sup>9</sup>When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. <sup>10</sup>Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. <sup>11</sup>But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." <sup>12</sup>He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." <sup>13</sup>And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son. <sup>14</sup>So Abraham called that place "The LORD will provide"; as it is said to this day, "On the mount of the LORD it shall be provided."

*Deuteronomy 5:16 (NRSV)*

<sup>16</sup>Honor your father and your mother, as the LORD your God commanded you, so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

*Matthew 12:46-50 (NRSV)*

<sup>46</sup>While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. <sup>47</sup>Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." <sup>48</sup>But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" <sup>49</sup>And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" <sup>50</sup>For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

*Could we ever make an idol of our family? What's more important than family? The question that Jesus might ask us is this: Who is your family?*

This is the fourth week in our series on American Idols and we've looked at several candidates vying for the center of our attention: work, success, even the past. And we've got busyness and wealth ahead of us. But I don't know that any of the candidates seem as non-threatening as "family." How, we ask ourselves, could family ever be an idol? Aren't we to honor our fathers and mothers? Didn't that make the top ten list? Aren't we Christians to be the upholders of "family values?" . . . The answers to all those questions is a straightforward "yes." So, what's up then, we ask, when Jesus seems to deny his own family in today's passage from Matthew 12? To answer that, we need to go all the way back to the story of Abraham and his son, Isaac, from Genesis 22.

*A son gained? A son lost?*

Years before, God had come to Abraham and his wife, Sarah, promising them that they would have descendents that outnumbered the stars. There was just one problem, Sarah was long past child bearing years. She couldn't have children! Yet, God's promise was God's promise, prompting Sarah to help God along. She had sent her maid, Hagar, to sleep with her husband and give Abraham that child. But that hadn't gone well at all. The descendents God had promised were to come from Abraham *and* Sarah.

Finally, as unbelievable as it seemed, Sarah got her baby. Abraham had fathered a child of the promise at last. Can you even imagine the joy and excitement. How little Isaac must have been spoiled and doted upon. How could it be otherwise? His birth was a genuine miracle, defying all natural explanation.

And then one day, when Isaac is a boy of some years, God comes to Abraham and says, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I show you.” We’re not

### We’re Adopted!

So how is it that we are part of God’s family? What does that really mean? The apostle Paul develops the metaphor of adoption and inheritance to describe our becoming God’s children. The text boxes in today’s study examine this theme of adoption.

In chapter 3 of his letter to the Galatians, Paul depicts the Old Testament Law as a custodian, who took care of God’s children. The Law showed them how to live, and disciplined them.

Paul then 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 has set up the estate. The law is the guardian. It is all humanity who have lived as minors, as slaves even, under the guardianship of the law<sup>1</sup>, bound to the “elemental spirits of the earth” (v. 3).

<sup>1</sup> 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.

Continued in the page 3 text box

told Abraham’s reply, if he even made one. Rather, we are told that Abraham rose early the next morning, loaded some animals, got Isaac, and headed off to Mt. Moriah.

I read this story and I wonder what is really going on with Abraham. Not a word of question or protest as he is instructed to offer his son as a burnt offering??

I’ve come to understand that Abraham had been with God for a long time. He had heard God’s promises and seen that God keeps his promises, even if it seems impossible. Abraham had seen God find a way forward time and again, against all odds.

I don’t really think that God is forcing Abraham to choose between God and Isaac. And he isn’t engaged in some sort of blind faith in God. Abraham is not blind when it comes to God, he has lived with God and seen the work and the faithfulness of the LORD God as no one else had before.

Abraham simply trusts God, confident that God will find a righteous way forward despite his command to turn Isaac into a burnt offering!

The biblical writer casts the story as a test of Abraham. Has he really come to know God’s loving-kindness? Does he really trust God? The answer is a resounding “yes.” As the apostle Paul would put it two millennia later, relying on Genesis 15:6, “Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” This is a way of saying that Abraham lives in right relationship with God precisely because he trusts God.

Abraham isn’t choosing God over family, but he *is* demonstrating that it is God whom he

trusts. It is God who lives at the center of his life. Even with the birth of the beloved Isaac, Abraham has not moved his family to the center, letting God slide to the side. And it is a good thing. As the stories of Genesis roll forward, Abraham’s family proves to be a pretty untrustworthy bunch.

And, of course, God does provide a way forward that doesn’t rely on the death of young Isaac. An angel arrives to tell Abraham that the burnt offering is to be of a ram that God has provided. Having seen that Abraham trusts God fully, that he has come to know God well, the angel reiterates the promises that God has made to Abraham regarding his many descendents . . . through Isaac.

Many centuries later, Jesus is busy teaching when he is told that his mother and his brothers are waiting outside for him. Jesus seizes the moment and makes the seemingly scandalous pronouncement that his mother and his brothers are those who do God's will, not the flesh-and-blood standing outside. It's as if he says that blood may be thicker than water, but obedience is thicker than blood.

### Adoption

Continued from the p. 2 text box

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 "redeemed<sup>1</sup>" 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.

<sup>1</sup> 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.

Continued in the p. 4 textbox

In this moment, Jesus is not tossing out one of the Ten Commandments. He came to fulfill the Law, not abolish it. Rather, he is teaching everyone that their new family in him shares a kinship deeper and stronger than any kinship based upon blood relationships. All believers are brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, a family created by the Holy Spirit which is eternal and unbreakable.

It isn't that Jesus is forcing us to a choice between God and family, but he is cautioning us about the choice we must make if it arises. In his commentary on Matthew, Eugene Boring writes: "Matthew's point is that those who have accepted Jesus' message, and thereby have been called to place the kingdom of God above even family loyalties . . . have found a new family in the community of disciples. [By stretching his hand out to the gathered disciples] Jesus signals his compassionate and direct response to those in need, his mighty act of deliverance to disciples in distress."<sup>1</sup>

When we come to faith in Jesus Christ we are taken into a new family. It doesn't replace the family into which we were born, but it does transcend that family. We not only gain countless new brothers and sisters, but gain Jesus as our brother (Matt. 12:50.) Take that in for a moment. God our Father and God our brother.

The text boxes in this week's study will take you through Paul's extended metaphor of our adoption into God's family and the inheritance we have in Jesus.

You might take a few minutes the next time you are at church to look at each person as you would family. The body of Christ is neither a club nor an organization though we might take on the trappings of either. We are a family -- brothers and sisters with one Father.

<sup>1</sup>From Boring's commentary in the *New Interpreter's Bible*, p. 298.

## Experiencing Our Adoption

(cont. from the p.3 textbox)

This “legal” adoption is not the end of 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.

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.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley is leading nearly two dozen St. Andrew Fellowship Groups through this series on *American Idols*. Edlen has written some discussion questions for the groups. They will be very helpful as well to those who are studying this series individually.

- Answer the following questions:
  - a) What resonated with you as you watched this video or looked at these pictures?
  - b) Did you see your family in these pictures?
  - c) Did you hear your story in either the past, present or future?
  - d) What makes a family?
  - e) What about those who are single or who have never had children? In what ways does the church idolize “family” to the point of excluding those who are not “family” people?
  - f) In what ways do we lose ourselves in our families?
  - g) In what ways do we idolize our families?
  - h) Do you know anyone (yourself included) whose family life has taken the place of their relationship with God? Is there a problem with that? Why or why not?
- Read Deuteronomy 5:6-7: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.”
  - a) What is one thing you can do to put your family in their proper place in your life?
  - b) How does addressing this (idol/issue) change your relationship with your family? How differently would your family life look?

## 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><b>Monday, Genesis 22</b> The story of Abraham's testing and the sacrifice of Isaac</p>	<p><b>Tuesday, Genesis 27:1-45</b> The treachery in Isaac's own household; Jacob and his mother scheme to steal his brother's blessing</p>
<p><b>Wednesday, Mark 3:31-35 &amp; Luke 8:19-25</b> Two other versions of today's story from Matthew 12. How do they differ? How are they similar? What can we learn by comparing them?</p>	<p><b>Thursday, Galatians 3:19-4:7</b> The purpose of the Law; our baptism into Christ; our inheritance as adopted children of God</p>
<p><b>Friday, Mark 7:9-13</b> Here, Jesus lifts up the importance of honoring parents, including economic support in their declining years. He claims that, by over-emphasizing traditions around monetary offerings to the Jerusalem temple, the Pharisees are discouraging people from taking care of their parents, i.e., keeping God's commandment.</p>	<p><b>Weekly Prayer List</b></p>

