Spirit of Adoption

Romans 8:12-17

Buckingham Church

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The word for “Father” in Korean is Aboji. The Korean word for “Daddy” is “Appa,” and the English letters “p” and “b” are pronounced the same in Korean, so it often sounds like the Aramaic word for Daddy, which is “Abba,” the word Jesus used in the Lord’s Prayer and at other times for God. Our third child, Ben, came to us from Korea when he was 2 and a half, and therefore spoke toddler Korean and no English. A few days after he came to our family, we were so excited when my husband came home from work and Ben jumped up, ran to hug him, and shouted “Appa, anyong!” which means “Hi, Daddy!”

Now, it seems odd that just a few days into his life with us, he would feel so confident in our love as to call us Daddy and Mommy. He had been taken from everything he knew of safety and security and love in his foster home in Korea, into a place that was foreign in every sense of that word. But we think we know one reason that happened so quickly.

Ben’s foster mother, whom we have met, had pictures of my husband and I and our other two children. She had been showing him those pictures and calling us “Appa” and “Omma” and explaining, as much as you can to a two-year-old, what was about to happen to him. She tried to help him understand that people loved him already where he was going, and that he didn’t have to be afraid.

Of course, he was afraid at first! But her words to him must have come back as he lived into our family. We owe her a great deal in many ways.

Here, in the letter to the Roman church, Paul is acting as foster mother to those young in the faith, and to us today. “For you did not receive a Spirit of slavery, to fall back into fear, but you have received a Spirit of adoption. When we cry, ‘Abba!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” Not second-best children, not sort-of family, but fully and completely equal as children. And this is very good news indeed.

Why? We are wanted, yearned for, and deeply loved by God, not because we do anything but simply because we **are**. And being confident in that love frees us from all the ways the world (what Paul here calls “the flesh”) assigns value to us and therefore makes us think we have to live up to being loved and valued. We are not obligated to, in Paul’s words “enslaved to,” a world that requires wealth, success, beauty, talent, lots of stuff, or “likes” to be loved and valued. We are not “trophy children.” Have you heard that phrase? It means that parents value a child only for how many “trophies” (literally sports trophies or other accolades in school or the arts) they bring home to set on the mantel. We don’t have to do stupid or dangerous or hurtful things in order to try to get notoriety or praise. We don’t have to pretend we are something we are not in terms of sexual orientation or gender identity in order to “fit in” to family or society. We don’t have to despair of ever being good enough to be loved. Unlike human parents, who can and do make mistakes and can sometimes communicate to a child that they are not valued, God, through Jesus, gave us the message again and again that we are so very loved and our ultimate “Appa/Omma” wants abundant and joyful life for us. And like any child, once we are confident of being loved, we can go out into the world and live into whatever our best life is, unafraid of losing that love and value. In the adoption community, we talk about giving children “roots and wings.”

Now, there’s a struggle side to this, too. Because if we buck the world and say that our value is not dependent on how we look (and therefore that we need to spend thousands of dollars to make ourselves look acceptable) or what we do for a living or what kinds of friends we have or how successful we become, then “the world” may not always treat us well. When we seek to love ourselves and others as we are loved, then the world tells us we’re misguided, naïve, stupid. If we are not always afraid in some way that we will not measure up if we do not conform to whatever power is out there at any given time, then we take a risk. As the scholar Paul Achtemeier writes, “To be a member of God’s family surely promises life and joy…but to be the child of a [Parent] against whom the world stands in rebellion means that the rebellion will also be directed at us.” (*Interpretation: Acts*, p. 138)

I was so struck by the Hitler quote that the high school student in Glastonbury chose to insert in the yearbook, attributed to George Floyd of all people. Of course, the act of doing so was horribly unloving to their classmate, but also reflects the nature of our society in this time. The quote referenced the fact that Hitler was amazed at what he could convince people to do, and that they did not understand the fullness of what his plan entailed. Get some people to break windows in Jewish businesses, and the Holocaust becomes a natural next step. In our time, get people to be afraid or suspicious of immigrants, Muslims, transgender people, and violent acts of hate become natural next steps. This is the way the world so often works, trying to convince us that we or others are not fit to be loved, a way that God’s love opposes with all its might. A way that people who are not living in fear refuse to participate in. And so are labeled weak or anti-American.

We do not need to live this way or treat other people who are also children of God, and so part of our family, this way. If we accept ourselves as part of God’s family, then God’s values become our guiding star and our solid base and our moral compass. We can stand for them without fear because we are so loved and valued and supported by our adoptive family. We do not need to react to other people out of fear.

That, my friends, is our superpower as Christians. Knowing that we are extravagantly loved, no matter what, we can extravagantly love, no matter what. That is the Spirit of adoption.

I think that the 8th chapter of this letter to the Romans is one of the most powerful pieces of the Bible. And Paul ends this particular conversation about us and God, and God’s family values, with these lines: “For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” Do you hear that? Do you believe it? (read it again). That’s what it means to be in God’s family. Amen.