

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Trinity Sunday
Sunday, May 30, 2021

“Spirit Bearing Witness”
Romans 8:12-17

The Rev. Dr. David Clark

When I was serving as a minister in North Bay, I came to know a wonderful Christian woman who was involved with a community group that met at the church. I often saw her at the church, and—whenever we’d chat—she’d tell me about how things were going for her adult children. But soon, I found that I really couldn’t keep track: I’d say, “Oh, you have a daughter in Victoria, too, and another daughter in Sudbury, and—wait, was your son in Toronto, and you have another son in Ottawa...but I thought your son was in Timiskaming? Wait a minute,” I asked, “How many kids do you have?”

I’m not sure whether she ever physically gave birth to a child, yet many children had grown up knowing her as their loving mother: she had adopted wonderful children, and she’d also served for years as a foster parent, caring for many more wonderful children who very much needed her loving nurture. Because of her love for them, children—who had no one to call “mother”—could at last call her “mother,” as she welcomed them lovingly into her home. Those who weren’t born as her children had *become* her children—had been welcomed into her family, into her home, into her love. I often think of her around Mother’s Day: I figure she must get repetitive stress injuries from opening all the cards!

As Christians, we maybe quite casually think of ourselves as “children of God,” and maybe we just assume that’s how it is—yet the New Testament does *not* say that we just *are* God’s children; rather, the New Testament affirms that we *become* God’s children. Being God’s children isn’t something we are by nature, by default—something we could just take for granted; rather, being God’s children is a gift that God gives us. It’s not something we deserve, as if we were entitled to be God’s children: the privilege of calling upon God as parent, as “Father”—trusting in God’s parental care and compassion—that is a gift, because God *chooses* to make us God’s children by adoption. *We have been adopted by God.*

We encounter this message again and again in the Letters of Paul. In Ephesians, we hear: God “destined us *for adoption* as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (1:5-6). Paul writes in Galatians: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son [...] so that we might *receive adoption* as children” (4:4-5). And again, in our reading from Romans this morning, Paul writes: “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! 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” (vv. 15-17).

It’s clear in the New Testament, and in our Epistle Lesson from Romans: we are children of God not by nature but by grace, not by birth but by adoption. And we can take hold of that name—“children of God”—knowing it’s all the more precious because it’s undeserved. It is a freely given gift that God has welcomed us into God’s home, into God’s family, and made us God’s children. As one theologian puts it: “What a wonderful, great promise that we are allowed to be God’s children! [...] It is God’s kindness that makes us children of God. [...] God himself has given us this status as a gift. God has elected us and by his Spirit has made us his children” (Busch). And, as our Epistle Lesson affirms our adoption as God’s children, this reveals to us the Trinity at work for our good, because it’s through the working of the Triune God that we become God’s children.

We are adopted by *God the Father*. “For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,” Paul writes, “but you have received a spirit of adoption” (v. 15). Paul emphasizes the difference between fear and adoption: God is powerful, glorious, and holy, and God’s presence inspires awe and even fear, yet—through our adoption—this holy God receives us as beloved children. To be adopted by God the Father means being welcomed as God’s own, as part of the family of God into which we were not born but into which we have been lovingly adopted. Adopted by God the Father, we discover “love [that] casts out fear” (1 John 4:18), that gives us courage in the care and keeping of our divine Parent.

And we are adopted by God the Father *through God the Son*. “We are children of God,” Paul writes, “and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (vv. 16-17). Christ is our older sibling, our older brother, who enables us to call God “Father.” Christ, the only Son of God, can alone rightfully call on God intimately as a parent; yet, through Christ, this privilege has been extended to us. As one Presbyterian resource puts it, “Jesus invites all humanity to acknowledge and to share with him the privilege of being God’s child” (*A Catechism for Today*). As Jesus leads us in the Lord’s Prayer, beginning with the words, “our Father,” he invites us to call his Father “*our* Father.” Jesus draws us into his own intimate relationship with God the Father.

We are adopted by God the Father through God the Son *in the power of God the Holy Spirit*. Paul writes, “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (vv. 15-16). We come to believe that we can call on God intimately as parent—as “Abba! Father!”—only when the Holy Spirit enables us to accept this wonderful gift. That the Lord of creation is our compassionate parent—this is Good News that we can recognize and believe only as the Spirit makes possible: as one theologian puts it, “When the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in a person’s heart, the first sign is that they recognize God as Father” (Wright). And indeed, as others have written, “God’s Spirit makes us members of God’s family” (P. Achtemeier) in a way that “connects us to God—not for a passing moment and at a distance, but eternally and intimately” (Busch). Paul writes: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God” (v. 14).

The Trinity is at work in our lives, adopting us as God’s children: God the Father is our parent, through Christ our brother, in the power of the Spirit. And this gift is always a shared gift: it’s we (not I), and children (not child). Our adoption joins us with those likewise adopted, with the community of the adopted—which is the church. The Trinity works in our lives to adopt us: none of us are entitled to call ourselves God’s children, but we are enabled to do so by the grace of God. And the church is the community of those celebrating their adoption into the family of God.

But Paul adds something else. He writes: “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,” then he writes, “—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him” (vv. 16-17). That’s a bit jarring, isn’t it? It’s a jarring conclusion to this uplifting Epistle Lesson. By the Spirit’s power, we’re made children of God—but, it turns out, only if we suffer alongside Christ.

One commentator explains it this way: “To be a member of God’s family surely promises life and joy [...], but to be the child of a Father against whom the world stands in rebellion means that the rebellion will also be directed at us” (P. Achtemeier). We might not welcome this aspect our adoption; however, becoming God’s children means being adopted into the family of God the Father, who cares for the powerless, for the poor, for those who are hated and marginalized; it means being adopted into the family of God the Son, who befriended outcasts and loved this world until it killed him; it means being adopted into the family of God the Spirit, who leads us to oppose the hatefulness around us. For those brave enough to live out the meaning of their adoption—for those whose actions and decisions conform faithfully to their identity as God’s adopted children—suffering comes with the territory.

Yet, though suffering accompanies faithfulness to the God who has adopted us, our adoption is—nevertheless—always life-giving. Paul writes: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the

dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit who dwells in you” (v. 11). To be adopted into the family of God means being drawn into the divine community that gives new life, having as our Father the God who raised Jesus, having as our brother the Risen Lord, having as our companion the Spirit who breathes resurrection.

Today is Trinity Sunday. Today the church celebrates who our God is, the Triune God, the Trinity: God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit. And today we celebrate the Good News that the Triune God has adopted us. Let us respond to this Good News with praise to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we sing “Now thank we all our God” (#457, in the *Book of Praise*).