

“The Spirit of Adoption”

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Romans 8:12-25

So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh— 13 for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. 14 For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 15 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!” 16 it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, 17 and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

18 I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; 20 for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; 23 and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

DEBT

In our lesson for today Paul tells us that we are in debt. It’s like that bumper sticker, “I owe. I owe. So, it’s off to work I go.”

But, of course when we talk about debt in the church, we’re talking about more than money.

We're talking about sin and guilt.
 What do we Presbyterians say in the Lord's Prayer?

"Forgive us our debts ..."

I think the financial analogy is a helpful way to understand sin.
 Debts have a way of controlling us.
 Financial debt can dominate our lives.

Owing a debt and personal loyalty to a corrupt person can also take us
 down the wrong path.
 A good example of this is the The Godfather movies.

The moral of those movies?
 Owing a debt to a malicious person, in this case a gangster, can make
 even the best person's life go in a horrible direction.

Well, Paul is saying something similar to us.
 He talks about "living according to the flesh."
 This means ordering our lives according to the ways of the world.

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he common phrase we use is "it's the way of the world."
 In other words, everyone is corrupt, we just have to be a part of the system.

If we do that, we owe a debt to the ways of the world.
 It's as we have pledged our loyalty to the Godfather.
 We participate in business as usual.

And there's a terrible price to be paid.
 If we live according to the flesh, if we live according to the ways of the
 world, ... then the world, like the Godfather, extracts its pound of flesh.

Paul puts it this way, "If you live according to the flesh, you will die."
 We cannot accept the corrupt ways of the world.
 It will lead to spiritual death and separate us from God's grace.

DEBTS PAID

But, it doesn't have to be that way.
 We don't owe the Godfather's of this world a favor any more.

God in Christ has broken the choke hold of sin.
We are no longer in debt to the world.

God in Christ has shown us mercy.
In Jesus Christ we are forgiven.
Our debts have been paid.

We owe no debts to anyone except to God.
And we are up to our eyeballs in debt to God!
We owe everything to God in Christ.
We are at God's mercy.

But, God is not the Godfather ... far from it.

God allows us to get out of debt by declaring personal bankruptcy.
No longer do we owe the world anything.

And the Spirit enables us to live in a new way.

Instead of being slaves to sin, we become God's children.
We are adopted by God, and that changes our life forever.

THE JOY OF ADOPTION

When children are adopted successfully, think about all the things that change in their lives.

They are given a new identity.
They are given a new home.
They are given new resources for living.
They are given a sense of security.

But, most of all, these children learn what it means to be wanted and loved.

When we are adopted by God, we are given all these things and more.
Instead of being a slave to our fears, we can call God "Father" or "Abba".

Abba is a very personal term.
It's like saying "Daddy" or "Poppy".
In other words, the love of God is analogous to the love of a good parent.

My parents went into debt so that I could attend college.
They would lend me money not like the bank lends, expecting compounded interest ... no, they gave me money out of love. They gave me everything I needed.

They didn't give me money to control me and bind me to the past.
They gave me money so that I might have a future.

I owe a debt to them that I can never repay.

But, that debt doesn't cause me to feel guilty.
That debt binds me to them and encourages me to try and help my own children and others.
I have a basic sense of trust and a sense of what is right because of the debt I owe to my parents.

Well, Paul is telling us that this is a good way to think about our relationship with God.
God is our Father. God is Abba.

We owe everything to God, we owe a debt to grace.
But, this debt is not a bad thing.

On the contrary, this great debt becomes something that binds us even more closely to God.
We know that our heavenly Father, just like good earthly fathers and mothers wants to give us what we need.

God cares for us and forgives our debt ... no strings attached.

Why?

Because we are part of the family.
We are heirs to the family fortune.

We are (as Paul put it) "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ".

INHERITANCE

When people hear the word inheritance, their eyes light up.

A financial windfall would be great right?
Think about all the debts that could be erased by a sizable inheritance.
It would be like winning the lottery.

Well, our inheritance as adopted sons and daughters of God is something like that.
We do get to share in the “glory” of Christ.

But, we also get to share in something else that we might not want.
We get to share in the “suffering” of Christ! (8:17)

Yikes!
Those prosperity preachers left that one out.
This is like inheriting the tendency to get diabetes or heart disease from our parents.

This kind of inheritance we don't need. Right?

But is it really possible to have great love without also experiencing at least some suffering?

Think about your own experiences with family.
Think about your grandparents, your parents, your husband, your wife, your children.
Think of all the people you love.

Haven't you suffered in some ways for that love?
Is it really possible to love someone without being terribly hurt from time to time?

Of course not.
Loving relationships are also, at times, our most painful relationships precisely because we care so much. The stories of our family are always the story of triumph and tragedy.

But, we stick with each other through thick and thin because we are family.

Well, God's family is the same way.
When the Spirit enables you to abandon the ways of the world and follow God's way, do you think the world is going to take it lying down?

Of course not.
The world persecuted and killed Jesus.
The world tried to get rid of him forever.

Now we know that it didn't work.
Resurrection took care of that.

But, Jesus warned his disciples,

“If they do this to me, don't you think they're going to do the same thing to you?
They will. Suffering, a cross will be part of your inheritance just as it will be for me.”

THE PAIN OF NEW BIRTH

But, just as it was for Jesus, suffering will not have the last word.

Paul reminds us in verse 18 “... the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us”. We become a part of Jesus' story by the power of the Spirit, and that includes not only glory but also suffering.

But, we know how the story ends.
Suffering will not have the last word.

The last word of God's story ends with:
Resurrection. Eternal life. Glory.

So the suffering we experience doesn't hold a candle to the glory.

Paul knew that we would have a hard time accepting the inheritance of suffering so he gives us another analogy. He compares the suffering we inherit to the travail of childbirth.

The birth of a child is an amazing event.
It is filled with all kinds of emotion:
joy, anxiety, pain, hope, fear ... you name it.

In other words, in order for new birth to happen, it's a struggle.

It's a roller coaster ride.

The birth of a child is filled with expectation.

When you first hear the news there is excitement and a bit of fear.

How will this change my relationships with the people I love?

Will I be a good parent?

But, people encourage you.

And as the days go by the mom and dad prepare for the big event.

Baby showers are held.

The baby's room is gradually filled with furniture and toys.

But, as the day draws near hope and anxiety increase in equal measures.

The mother to be has become uncomfortable large.

She can't wait to get it over with.

And those childbirth classes seem woefully inadequate to the father to be who hopes he can at least remember the way to the hospital when the time comes.

Toward the end of pregnancy the expecting couple is straining toward the future.

New birth is never easy.

And so it is for those of us who are disciples of Jesus Christ as we await the New Creation.

We have received the good news that a baby is on the way ... in fact the labor pains have already begun in fits and starts. But, the glory of the new birth has not quite come to fruition. We live in the "in between time" ... what theologians have called the "already" and the "not yet".

And therein lies the suffering.

Suffering is inevitable for the child of God.

We are in the world but we are not of the world.

Like a woman in childbirth we long for that new birth to happen.

We know that it's coming.

We will be adopted.

We will be God's children.
But, it's like our adoption is not quite complete.

We know that we will be saved.
But it's like our redemption is not yet complete.

We're on the verge ... but it hasn't quite happened yet.
We know it's true because we are a down payment on the future.

The Spirit of God, like the first fruits of a great harvest, has come into our hearts and convinced us of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

But, the great harvest is yet to come.
We have to wait a few more days before we can go to the fields.

CREATION

And not only are we straining toward the future ...
Paul said that all of creation is groaning in labor pains,
anticipating the coming of this new world.

This refers to the story of creation in book of Genesis.

You'll remember that when God created the world He pronounced it good.
And God gave the man and the woman stewardship over the earth.
It was their job to care for this good world that God had created.

But, when sin entered this world, things went haywire.
God's bond between the man and the woman was marred.
Human beings became estranged from each other in terrible ways.

And, more than that, even creation was changed from the idyllic garden
that it was meant to be.
Thorns and thistles infested the ground, and what had once been a utopian
existence now became a struggle to survive. (Genesis 3:8-19)

The longing of creation for new life is even more relevant in our day and
time.

We see how our failed stewardship of God's good creation is creating the potential for global disaster. We see the effects of sin in the weather, and we thirst for a world that is more predictable.

Paul tells us that there is a longing in the human heart and even creation to return to the good world that God created. We truly do want to get back to the garden

And all this contributes to our pain.
We suffer because we are not satisfied.

We know in our hearts that we are not the people that we should be.
And we know that the world is not what it should be.

God's good creation has been marred by sin.
We have been marred by sin.

HOPE

But, sin is not the only force in the world.
There is also hope.

And oddly enough, this hope is born out of suffering.

Our dissatisfaction, our suffering is a like a birth pain. It is the beginning of a new creation.

In the Old Testament there is the idea that the suffering of the faithful will usher in the Day of the Lord. These birth pangs would bring about God's final deliverance.

Those difficult days would herald the coming of the Messiah.

As you might imagine, Christians later took that same theme and applied it to the cross.

Jesus suffering on the cross was seen as the fulcrum, the pivotal point of history.

His suffering on the cross gave birth to the Kingdom of God.

It was the beginning of a new creation.

And when we become a part of that kingdom, we also join Jesus in that suffering.

We strain toward the future.

We want something new to be born in our world.

And in this way we participate in the kingdom that comes.

In the midst of a world that is groaning for deliverance, we see salvation on the horizon.

THE MUSIC OF SALVATION

One commentator I read this week suggested that our lives are like a great symphony.

We have heard the beginning of the music.

The great theme of our life has been stated by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And now we are in the middle of the music where the themes have become complex and sometimes dark. There is a tension created that we long to have resolved.

But, the whole point of listening to great music is to allow that tension to be resolved through the completion of the whole piece. You can't hear it in three or four minutes. You can't hear it while fifty other things are going on at the same time.

You have to sit down and really listen.

You need patience.

Paul tells us in our lesson for today that even as we strain toward the future and want the suffering to end, we need patience. There is value in listening to our lives.

There is value in appreciating where this dark and difficult music is taking us.

This is hope.

And because we have hope we can have patience.

Now don't misunderstand.

Patience is not merely waiting for the end.

Verse 19 tells us that patience is awaiting the future with a sense of “eager longing”.

The phrase means literally “to crane one’s neck”.

It’s like a child at a fourth of July parade standing on tip toe and craning her neck so that she can see the next float. This is the posture we assume when we are certain that something wonderful is coming just around the corner.

I’ll let you in on yet another strange quirk that I have.

I’m an amateur audiophile.

Have you ever heard that word?

It means that I have an obsession with hearing the music, all the music. It means I spend money on expensive stereo equipment and insist on digital music files.

Don’t talk to me about iTunes and their compressed files.

Keep your wireless bluetooth speaker to yourself.

I want to hear all the music.

I’m one of those guys who sits on the edge of my seat in the sweet spot between two speakers and listens to every note.

You may think that I’m strange or obsessed ... or maybe both. And you could be right!

But, there’s a reason for my madness.

I just want to hear the music.

I just want to hear the music because it stirs my emotions and takes me places that nothing else can do.

In a greater way, faith works like this.

When we really listen to the music of faith it pulls us forward.

We long to hear the final note.

We crane our neck in eager expectation.

We sit on the edge of our seat.

And this kind of faith motivates us to get up out of our seat and do God's will.

This kind of faith motivates us to work for justice.

This kind of faith motivates us to be good stewards of creation.

This kind of faith helps us anticipate the music to come.

This kind of faith gives us hope.

But, in the meantime we also groan in our anticipation of the kingdom that comes.

We struggle to hear the sound of God's trumpet.

We know that there is more music, music that is just beyond us and above us.

We anticipate the future.

There is divine music that we can't quite hear.

This struggle is an important part of what it means to have faith.

A preacher recalled something that happened on the old "Muppet Show". Some of you may remember the "Ralf" a dog muppet who was always playing the piano.

On one show he was playing a gorgeous Beethoven sonata.

He was somewhere in the middle of the piece when the stage manager whispered to him that had only fifteen more seconds. So "Ralf" played a few more measures of the sonata and then ended with the show's familiar quickie ending "Ba ba ba ta da dum."

Dumbing down beautiful music is ludicrous.

And so is dumbing down what it means to have faith.

The preacher noted that sometimes in the church we try to dum down the complex music of faith. We insist on what he called "happy-clappy" music and sermons that answer every question.

In a world that is experiencing the labor pains of a new creation we put on a plastic smile and say,

“I’m not upset. It’s all a part of God’s plan.”

Paul tells us that it’s not that easy.

Our struggle for a better world is not a sign of doubt but a sign of faith.
It is a sign that we are longing for the new creation.

True faith is not rewriting God’s symphonic music by quickly tacking on a
“Ba ba ba ta da dum” and calling it a day.

True faith is a combination of patience and hope.

True faith is waiting for the complexities of life to be resolved by the Divine
music.

Labor pains are a part of new birth.

The Bible tells us ...

We groan.

Creation groans.

And even the Spirit of God groans ... in anticipation of the age to come.

But, we have hope.

We have hope because we know where the music is taking us.

We know that the adoption papers have been signed.

We know that we are God’s children.

We know that we are heirs to the Kingdom.

We know that one day we will sing the Hallelujah Chorus.

We know that one day we will sing together in glory,

“All creatures of our God and King ... Lift up your voice and with us sing.
Alleluia.”

But, until that day we wait on tiptoe ... and strain to hear the music.

Can you hear it?

It is the music of the New Creation.

Amen.