

FAIRMOUNT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
JUNE 7, 2009
A SERMON BY REV. RICHARD D. CLEWELL
“ADOPTED AS BELOVED CHILDREN”
TEXT: Romans 8:12-17

Today is a very special day here at Fairmount. I stand before you with this stole emblazoned with strawberries. Although it is officially Trinity Sunday in the church calendar, this first Sunday of June has been unofficially adopted into our calendar at Fairmount Church as the Strawberry Festival for almost fifty years. I must confess that I'm just as happy not to have to preach on the mystery of the Trinity, and would much rather be caught up in the festivities as we celebrate and enjoy this adopted holiday of joy as a congregation and community.

Adoption has always been both an interesting and intriguing concept as I have observed it in my experience. It is so often the case that human beings who are adopted into caring families, at some point in their journey through life, seek to find their birth parents, especially their mothers. For example, a good friend of mine was in his late fifties when he received a phone call one evening from a total stranger who said to him, "Hello, this is your oldest sister Carolyn." Once he got over the initial shock, his long conversation with her, though surprising, made sense. After getting her contact information, he called his aging mother and the story was confirmed. In high school his mother and her later-to-be husband conceived a child out of wedlock. His mother had been whisked away to another state to a Crittenden home where she gave birth and gave the baby up for adoption to a family on the East Coast. During their marriage they never told my friend or his older sister about their sibling. This story has had a happy outcome as this family has been reunited and continue in relationship even after his mom and dad passed away.

The Apostle Paul in our lectionary text speaks of our adoption into God's family. (Read Romans 8:12-17) In this eighth chapter, Paul contrasts life led by the Spirit to life without God which is focused in fear and centered in the world system. The latter is a life led in separation from our creator and alienated from the life God intended for us. The life lived apart from God's way becomes a style of behavior which is caught up in the world system which has no end but death.

The difference the spirit makes was first seen in the exodus story of the Hebrew Bible. There the symbols of God's peaceful presence were seen in the pillar of cloud by day and the fiery pillar at night that led them out of exile into the land of promise and into a new way of living in the divine presence.

Here Paul replaces and enhances that truth in the indwelling theme explaining what the Spirit does for God's daughters and sons in assuring their divine adoption and leading them to a fuller meaningful life. In Galatians, Paul also points to this relationship when he declares, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying 'Abba, Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child and if a child then also an heir, through God." (Gal. 4: 4-7) What Paul makes clear is that the Spirit you and I have received, precisely because it is the Spirit of Jesus, the Son, is the Spirit of relationship or adoption. Paul believes that it is by the Spirit that Christians learn from the heart to call God "Father" and in so doing, the Spirit bears witness with us that we belong to God in the same relationship where we, as Christ, call God, "abba," and Christ is truly our brother. The late William Sloane Coffin provides us insight when he writes, "God is love' means the revelation is in the relationship. 'God is love' means God is known devotionally, not dogmatically. 'God is love' does not clear up old mysteries; it discloses new mystery. 'God is love' is not a truth we can master; it is only one to which we can surrender. Faith is being grasped by the power of love." (*Credo*, p. 28)

There are several truths which are captured in the relationship that faith establishes. How often have we heard the statement "they treated me just like family?" These words express how warmly one has been received as a guest or friend. Being a member of a family confers upon a person certain privileges and responsibilities toward other members of that family that are among the closest of human ties. To be a member of a family means one shares with others a common life in mutual interdependence. God through the Spirit not only treats us "just like family," but actually unites us into the very family of God through loving adoption.

To be led by God's Spirit therefore means to have changed our future from death to life, to have changed our relationship to God from rebellion to faithfulness, and to have transformed our status from enemy to beloved child where within the family, i.e. the community of the faithful, we can genuinely address God as loving parent.

Another truth in being a member of God's family is the promise of future life and joy but also the presence of rebellion against God by the world system being directed at us. Such opposition gives us the opportunity to respond to the Spirit who in Christ has proclaimed peace in the face of confrontation and declares "Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world. (John 16: 33) Those who belong to God's family are transformed in such a way that their former world is no longer their home. This

transformation brought about by God's Spirit is such that one becomes a foreigner to the culture to which one once belonged. Yet, that is a very small price to pay for the privilege of being called God's own through Christ.

Practically speaking, to compare the Christian community to a family means we must bring the same expectations, love, and patience to fellow Christians in the church that one should also bring to members of one's own family. Attitudes that destroy a family – uncaring disregard on the part of one spouse or partner toward another, selfish ignoring of the needs of children by parents or of parents by children, preoccupation with one's own interests at the expense of consideration of others in the family – will also destroy a church community. We need to ask what are our relationships with one another, the family, and the community of the faithful? Are we listening to the Spirit of Christ within us?

The lectionary traditions call for this reading on Trinity Sunday which begins the second half of the church year. It is to be a time when we concentrate on our response to the calling Jesus Christ through his ministry, death, resurrection and the coming of his indwelling Spirit. There is great joy in knowing we belong to God both by creation and by the divine choice to love and to adopt us as daughters and sons. How aware will we be of the Spirit leading us in our lives? Oswald Chambers, the great preacher and writer, states, "Faith never knows where it is being led, but it knows and loves the One who is leading." May this be true in our faith journeys. Go now on this adopted Strawberry Festival Day and enjoy this family of faith and those in the community who find joy in this occasion. Know always that you belong to the Lord who loves you with no strings attached and who gives the Spirit to lead you into faithfulness. Thanks be to God – Abba Father. Amen

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