

# *Adopted into the Family*

a sermon

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Romans 8:12–25

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“Who are you?”

When I meet new people, I like to find out a bit about them. So I do what probably a good number of you do: I ask them things. Maybe not exactly “who are you?” Instead I ask

where they’re from,  
what they do,  
if they’ve got family around,

all these to help me learn who they are.

It isn’t really twenty questions, although maybe some of these new acquaintances (or victims) find that it’s a bit much. (I do have that effect on some people.) But generally, I find, most like to share a bit about who they are.

There’s only so much you can learn when you first meet someone. But as time goes along, and as I have more time, I can ask bigger questions, more involved questions. I can ask things that come up from what the person has said before, building on it:

what it’s like to live in that person’s neighborhood,  
whether she likes her work,  
what he does on his time off.

Yet I think that there’s a lot more to us

than residence,  
and employment,  
and entertainment,  
and preferred brands,  
and favorite delicacies.

Some of that “more” is found in the people we love: spouses and sweethearts and parents and siblings and children.

I have felt this a lot over my years in getting to know a lot of people from many other churches and church organizations, getting to know some of them pretty well, I think, and them me: I’ve felt that, as much as they know me, and I them, they cannot know me as well as they might when they have never met Tammi.

Because she is so much a part of my life, so much a part of me, and I a part of her, that, really, to know me really well you’ve got to meet Tammi. And when I get to know someone, I often hope that I will also get to have the picture of them filled out even more by being able to meet the one this person finds dear.

So it's fun to get to know people a bit more, taking up the challenge to do this. And it can be a challenge. Because I've found that sometimes people don't know themselves all that well. It's true.

Oh, sure, they know the surface things: where they live, where they work, what they watch, what they eat. They may know, too, the people they love, and that gives further shape and maybe even some depth to their living and their self-understanding. But beyond that things can get murky, usually in the realm of "why?", making people helpless should I ask about their *reasons*

for loving the people they love,  
or choosing the careers they've chosen,  
or fearing the objects they fear,  
or stressing over some things but not other things.

People are often blind to these, which tells me that for them, maybe for most of us, we have a ways to go before we really understand ourselves, should someone ask us, "Who are you?"



This is also the question that our Bible passage this morning asks. Not only does it ask it. It also answers it.

Paul is having us consider who we are. Yet not as individuals, not as separate people. He is wanting us to think about who we are *together*, not merely "Who am I?" but really "Who are *we*?" And he has a very good idea about who we are, and he wants us to know that. He wants us to know who we are.

The "we" he's talking about are Christians. He's talking about the church. He's talking about

those who believe in Jesus,  
who follow him,  
who are baptized with his baptism,  
who are remade and made clean by his death and resurrection.

He is talking about *us*.

Now, this isn't the only place where Paul touches on this. In other letters, Paul writes about this "we," the church. And he uses a variety of images to describe us, the church.

In one place (it's in First Corinthians), he describes the church as a *body*, and like a body it has different members having different functions, like eyes and ears and feet and hands, yet unlike other bodies this body has Jesus Christ as its head. "For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ" (1 Corinthians 12:12).

In another part of First Corinthians, he describes those who belong to the church as a field, and then in that same verse, as a building.

Beyond Paul, we can find other images for the church in the New Testament. The church is described as a priesthood, as a nation, as a temple, as a bride, as a flock.

I think these are great images, each of them with breadth and depth of meaning. I may have even overlooked a few.

Here in Romans, Paul uses a different image for the church. Here, he uses the image of *family*. The church is a family. *We* are a family.

This image, of course, is one that many congregations like. (Maybe even our own.) It's how they understand themselves. It's how they see themselves. Maybe it's even part of their advertising! "We're a family church," they say.

Of course, "family" can mean different things to different people, just as people have very different experiences of family. And not all of them are good.

To some, family is something like a private club, granting admission to members while turning aside everyone else. Or it's like a fortress, protecting those inside and keeping out those on the outside.

Maybe you know families like that. And, you know, that is how some congregations are a family. They pay attention to those on the inside, but are closed to those on the outside, who find it exceptionally difficult to gain entry into that church family. When that congregation describes itself as a family, it's really just code for their intention never to let anyone new belong. Whether they know it or not, that's what they mean when they say the church is a family.

To some, family is a system of dysfunction, a place where secrets are kept and control is maintained by guilt and threats. Maybe you know families like that. And guess what? That's how some congregations are a family. There, secrets *are* kept, and control *is* maintained, by guilt and by threats. There, they pretend to be the Von Trap family, or the Waltons, but really they act more like the Bunkers, or the Sopranos. When that congregation describes itself as a family, it's really just code for their deeply ingrained habits of coercion and control. Whether they know it or not, that's what they mean when they say the church is a family.

To some, family is a place of abuse, a house of horrors, in which harm to the vulnerable continues until, one way or the other, someone leaves, perhaps to safety, perhaps to another abuser, perhaps to an early grave.

Such families are less well known, but we know that they exist. And sadly, there are some congregations (a few, yet still too many) who are that kind of family. They are places of abuse, where rules of silence protect abusers and destroy victims. They are houses of secrets, and the maintaining of those secrets is the most important thing there. Whether they know it or not, that's what they mean when they say the church is a family.

Paul has a different understanding of the church as a family. He describes the church not just as any family, but instead as the family of *God*. This is the family in which we are children of God.

But it's really important what Paul then says about *how* one becomes a member of this family. You see, it's not by *birth* that we are in this family. It's not a natural fact of life. It's not a "given." And it's not something that we have earned, either. We pay something to get into the family. For Paul, becoming and being part of this family happens because we are *adopted* into that family, by God, by the action of the Holy Spirit. Hear again what he says, starting in verse 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!" 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 (Romans 12:15–17).*



*Adopted:* that’s what we are,  
adopted by God,  
compassionately brought into God’s family,  
without any merit or deserving on our part.

God’s relationship to us through Jesus Christ, Paul tells us, is very much like an adoption. We are heirs of God, and joint heirs with Christ. But we who are in Christ didn’t do anything to merit this connection with God, and we don’t come by it naturally. God, all on God’s own, simply decided — to make us part of the family.

So when Paul speaks of adoption, and the Spirit causing us to cry out “Abba! Father!” he’s describing a *relationship* that exists between believers and God, not an abstract *concept*. To say, “oh, we’re all children of God” is, for many, to speak just an abstract concept, because it is for them about as meaningful as saying “One plus one equals two.” But a relationship, *with God*, well that’s something else entirely. Concepts you can easily ignore. A relationship, especially *this* relationship, is much harder to ignore. For this relationship changes everything.

That’s what that funny word, “Abba,” is getting at. It’s Aramaic, the language that Jesus spoke, and which Paul likely grew up speaking.

Some of you may have been told that “Abba” is Aramaic for “Daddy,” but that’s not really true. It means “father,” but not in the language of little children; it’s not baby talk. Nor is it a formal word for fathers in general, or someone else’s father. Instead, “Abba” is used when someone, an adult or child, is speaking directly to that person’s own father.

It’s not a concept; it’s about a relationship.  
It’s not an abstraction; it’s about conversation.  
It’s not about fixed notions of gender;  
it’s about the love God has for us.

“Abba” is about a relationship, and not a concept, just as adoption by God through the Spirit is about a relationship, not a concept. It’s a relationship that transcends and puts to shame all uses and abuses of the concept of fatherhood.

And, to be sure, through the ages plenty have done just that: taken the concept of “fatherhood” and used it to abuse and to control. By its abuse, some families have become insular and dysfunctional prisons. For some, the *concept* has been so emptied of its intended meaning by the very people meant to embody it, that it can no longer be a vehicle to the *relationship* it was meant to illustrate. Actually, for some, the concept of “father” now stands as an obstacle in the way of that relationship.

We need to get this, and be compassionate: because of the abuse some have suffered from human fathers, hearing God called “father” fills them with dread, or revulsion.

But God is not bound by concepts. God is not hindered by abstractions. God is not hemmed in by the crimes of human parents. The Holy Spirit brings life out of death and faith out of unbelief. And through that same Spirit,

the lost are adopted into God's family,  
the lonely are restored,  
and the abused are healed and renewed.



Paul sees the church, he sees *us*, as a family, *God's* family. The church is where God is not a concept but the Holy One with whom we are in relationship, as parent to child. We are in this family, not naturally, not as an inevitable outcome in a predictable course of events. No, we are in this family because of adoption.

That's pretty important. Because when we forget this, when we forget that we are God's family not because we've earned it or because we deserve it, not because it is our inalienable right or our just reimbursement — when we forget that by *adoption* we've been brought into God's family at a price dear to God, then it's just about certain that the "church" we become will be

a private club,  
or a fortress of solitude,  
or a house of destructive secrets.

But to remember our adoption, and to live in the joy of that adoption, makes it more likely that we, by God's help, will live truly as God's family, serving — to any and to all — as companions:

companions around the Word Christ embodied and the meal Christ shared;  
companions in service to Jesus;  
companions in bearing witness to Jesus;  
companions in following Jesus:  
    from joy to joy,  
    in the midst of heartache and failure,  
    through the valley of the shadow of death,  
        where the road does not end,  
        because Jesus himself has walked it.

My friends, we've been adopted into this family.  
Now let's live like it.