

“Children of God”

Have you had feelings of frustration over the last year and a half? Have you thought that the world is going crazy? A worldwide pandemic has changed how we live. Political divisions in our country have created tensions. We don't seem to be getting rid of the problems that have plagued our nation for years. Hopefully you have been okay throughout all this stress. Hopefully your faith and the support of others in the Christina community have sustained you.

But some of you may have struggled. Some of you may be going through sufferings which will not go away. Maybe you have thought it's just not worth it, that maybe this Christian faith is not really helping me. Maybe I should just try to do it all myself.

In our scripture passage today, Romans 8:12-17, Paul frames an argument for the assurance of our faith and an appeal for gratitude for God's grace. He offers a celebratory description of present Christian existence, rooted in God's past action in Jesus Christ, assured of God's future action for Christ's people and for the whole world, and sustained in the present by the Holy Spirit. On this Trinity Sunday, we see how all three persons of the Trinity help us sustain our faith.

There is an Exodus theme in how God has delivered us from our former life. We see God's justice. There is God's covenant faithfulness established to put the

world right as God has extended the Abrahamic promises of inheritance not just for Israel but for the whole creation.

In the NSRV version of this passage, Paul sums it up by writing that we are “debtors to God’s grace.” We are in debt to God because by being God’s children we are also God’s heirs. We are fellow heirs with Christ since, sharing in his sufferings, we also share in his glory. Verse 17 is the bridge---God is utterly purposed to bring all those in Christ to their glorious Christ shaped inheritance.

Paul warns against going back to the former way of life. He warns against continuing to live “according to the flesh.” Another version of the passage warns against living our lives based on selfishness. We must recognize that the human body, corruptible and headed for death, is not all it might be and not all it will be in the resurrection. To take orders from the body is to live again under the tyranny of death.

The alternative is to see the death-based inclinations of the present body for what they are and to anticipate the verdict of the grave by putting these human desires and deeds to death here and now. There are styles of behavior, that, like weeds left to grow unchecked, have the opportunity to take over the garden and choke out the flowers. They must be uprooted, killed off. Last weekend Ellisa had me work in our flower beds to get rid of weed trees. I was able to pull some of

them up by the roots, but some had been unattended for so long I had to use the shovel to dig them up. It was not easy, but it had to be done. I got in my strength training!

It is impossible to get rid of bad deeds and habits for those who are still in the flesh. Those who are led by the Spirit will find that the Spirit's inner agency makes them say no to practices that carry the smell of death within them.

Paul wants us to understand that we are led by the Spirit of God as the children of God. The leading of the Spirit gives us divine adoption. The image here is taken from the wilderness wanderings of Israel, led by the pillar of cloud and fire. The Spirit now does for the people what the tabernacle presence of God did in the wilderness, assuring them of divine adoption and leading them forward in their inheritance.

We do not receive a spirit of slavery that would lead us back into fear. The pillar of cloud and fire is not leading you back into Egypt. It is leading you forward. Paul uses the term "Abba Father." It is by the Spirit that Christians learn to call God Father. By using the term "Abba," Paul can conclude that throughout the church, in whatever language that God was known, that such term means an intimate familial relationship used by adults as well as children. The term "Abba" is a tender and personal term and entirely appropriate for God. It was a way of

making one own all of the Exodus promises of the scriptures, of calling upon the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

We must understand the context when Paul writes that the Christian is adopted into the family of God. As discussed by the commentator William Barclay, adoption was much more difficult in Roman times. It was more involved than the process we follow and even though adults can be adopted today, the adoption of adults was more common in Roman times and often took place between families.

There were four consequences of an adoption in Roman times. First, the person lost all rights in his former family and gained all the rights of a fully legitimate son in the new family. He got a new father. Second, it followed that he became heir to his father's estate. Third, in law, the old life of the adopted person was completely wiped out. All his debts were wiped out. The adopted person was regarded as a new person entering into a new life with which the past had nothing to do. Fourth, in the eyes of the law, the adopted person was literally and absolutely the son of his new father.

What we take from Paul's writing about adoption and becoming a child of God is this transformation of our lives. Once we were in absolute possession of sin, absolute control of our own human nature, but God in his mercy brought us into

absolute possession of him. Our old life has no more rights over us, the debts of the past are wiped out; we begin a new life with God. We become heirs of all the riches of God, joint heirs with Christ. That which Christ inherits, we also inherit.

So, how does today's passage apply to our daily living? We must understand that in our culture our being indebted to God's grace and God's lordship may bring us criticism or sarcasm or ridicule. In the 20th century and into the 21st century, much has been written about a "human coming of age" that renders unnecessary and undesirable all obligations and dependence. It promotes that anything else other than complete independence leaves us immature as human beings.

Theologies that insist on a permanent indebtedness to grace and God are seen as perpetrating a bullying or dominant God.

The 'human coming of age' is even more prevalent in the United States with its technology and the great power developed by the nation in the 20th century.

With the end of World War II and the status of the United States as a superpower, many came to believe we could do it on our own, with or without God. This belief had much to do with the proclamation in the mid-1960s that God was dead. This idea was not necessarily that God was really dead. It revolved around the idea that we did not need God. It promoted the belief that we needed to be independent of God and in only this way could we achieve human dignity.

Our passage today actually explains that the condition of indebtedness to God is an enhancement of human dignity. Standing on one's own feet is about as sensible as a drowning person protesting against being thrown a life vest. What Paul promotes, develops is being made in God's image and being remade in the image of God's son. There can be no greater human dignity than this. To seek for a status independent of this is to shake one's fist at God, to worship some part of the created order (perhaps oneself) and to be remade in the image of that which was enslaved to decay and death. To insist on being independent of God's grace makes no sense. It reminds me of the Israelites, after all God had done for them, making the golden calf to worship.

The story of grace is one in which humans find themselves by losing themselves, being indebted to God's grace. Through the leading of God's Spirit, and inspiring the cry of "Abba," our own human spirit is assured that we are God's children. And we need that assurance and dependence on God's grace more than ever today. Humans are not working out their problems. For at least a decade, Congress has been at a standstill over passing legislation to deal with major problems in our country. People are less interested in reaching agreements than they are in proving themselves right. People cannot even get along on airplanes!

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As we close today, let us rejoice that we are God's children, as God's children, we are also God's heirs. One who is a Christian is a fellow heir with the Messiah. We are here to help the Messiah rule over the world, bringing redemption to a world that longs for it. There is a cost, the path to glory lies along the road of suffering. But we know the Spirit will guide us and we know that we will one day share in that inheritance of the glory of God as children of God.