

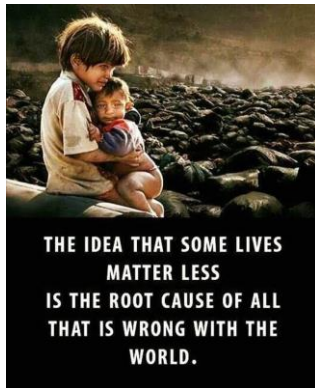
*Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor*

July 19, 2020 (Proper 11, Year A)
Romans 8:12-25
Christmas in July

You can't possibly look at the world today and say, "Ah, this is RIGHT. This is how it SHOULD be. This is how GOD WANTS it to be."

No, even looking past Covid-29, there is so much that is WRONG with this world. There is so much hate. So much anger. So much division.

I keep coming back to this quote.



There IS something wrong with this world. These days it seems like the world is QUICK to "orphan" people. It rejects the odd, routinely ignores the unusual, redefines the acceptable, and is repulsed by those out of the ordinary. It "orphans" the poor. It "orphans" the elderly. It "orphans" the addict. It "orphans" the outsider. It "orphans" all those who do not comfortably fit ITS standards for who can be called a "child of God."

Jesus wasn't so picky. Jesus invited the wildest and weirdest to join him on his journey towards the kingdom. He included EVERYONE. He said, "I know who you are; I know what you've done; I KNOW you . . . and I STILL CHOOSE you."

In Romans, Paul called it "adoption." He wrote, "All who are led by the Spirit of God are CHILDREN of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption."

Now, to describe our relationship to God and to our brothers and sisters in Christ as adoption – that's radical, life-changing stuff.

To have a name MEANS something. But what if your name meant NOTHING...to ANYONE...ANYWHERE? What if you had no family at all? What if you had no one that CARED about you? Then you're beginning to understand what it means to be an orphan. It means to have NO ONE, NO ONE that loves you, to be ABANDONED, to be COMPLETELY ALONE.

When a family adopts a child, they're giving that child a tremendous gift. They're doing MORE than giving the child their name; adoption changes EVERYTHING for the child. It gives them a new status, a new identity. It means that wherever they go and whatever they do, they are part of something bigger than themselves: they are part of a family, with a history. And they're loved. They are WANTED and they are loved.

When we are baptized, we become children of God; we are adopted into GOD'S family. We are deeply wanted and deeply loved. We become brothers and sisters with Christ and we share everything that He has.

And because we are joined with Christ, we are able to call to God in some of the sweetest words there are: "Abba, Father." You see Abba doesn't JUST mean Father; Abba is the most intimate form of that word. The closest translation we have for it would be "daddy, daddy." All you fathers out there, do you remember the first time you HEARD that word? It's a word of absolute and unconditional trust and love.

That's the kind of relationship that God wants with US. We are part of God's family. We are brothers and sisters in Christ. We are brothers and sisters with Christians half way across the world. We are brothers and sisters with ALL Christians EVERYWHERE in Christ. We are all part of GOD'S family.

And that's WHY, St. Paul says, we WAIT with eager longing. The "eager expectation" Paul describes, the word he USES, if you were to look it up, it's LITERALLY the act of craning your neck to get a better look at what's coming down the road. It's the word used for the upturned face of the farmer watching the sky before starting up the combine for harvest. It's the word used for the leaning forward of a woman on a train platform as she awaits a loved one's arrival.

We KNOW the world is NOT as it should be. We know the world is meant to be BETTER than it is. As Paul puts it, "we know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves." I think that's the STRONGEST image Paul could have used. Like a woman giving birth, we are all GROANING for the birth of a new day.

That's what was going on that first CHRISTMAS. Like Mary giving birth to Jesus, we know that redemption is coming, and the pain of the DIFFERENCE between what we HOPE for and what we NOW SEE is EXCRUCIATING. But Jesus WAS born, and HOPE was born WITH him.

I've talked to MANY adopted people over the years, and one story I have heard over and over again is that, as a child, when they were feeling especially lonely and alone, right before bed, they would imagine GOD giving them a hug, because there was no one else who would. And that hug from God gave them such a sense of safety and security that they could FINALLY sleep.

That's a hug we ALL need to feel. It's a hug that God gave when he became flesh and lived among us, as he chose every one of us to be sons and daughters: For God so "hugged" the world.

Carolina Sandell was a Lutheran pastor's daughter in Sweden. She was a "daddy's girl" – very close to her father. As a child, she enjoyed playing quietly in her father's study as he worked.

Carolina began writing hymns at an early age. Then, when she was 26 years old, she and her father were passengers in a boat crossing Lake Vattern. In the midst of a conversation, the boat unexpectedly lurched and her father fell overboard. As Carolina watched in horror, her father drowned before anyone could save him.

In her pain and grief at being an orphan, she wrote a hymn. She wrote *Children of the Heavenly Father*. I want us to sing the song as we close our time together this morning. Listen to the lyrics, and give thanks that we are orphans no more.

Children of the heav'nly Father
Safely in His bosom gather;
Nestling bird nor star in Heaven
Such a refuge e'er was given.

God His own doth tend and nourish;
In His holy courts they flourish;
From all evil things He spares them;
In His mighty arms He bears them.

Neither life nor death shall ever
From the Lord His children sever;
Unto them His grace He showeth,
And their sorrows all He knoweth.

Though He giveth or He taketh,

God His children ne'er forsaketh;
His the loving purpose solely
To preserve them pure and holy.

We are orphans no more. And we know who our Father is. With Christ our brother, we can look to heaven with the eyes of a child and say, "Daddy." Amen.