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Rom. 8:12-25 & Matt. 13:24-30,36-43

When you ask people to talk about their church, across location and denomination, the most common description people use is one of family. It’s a complicated way to describe a church community – not only because that analogy can have all sorts of connotations and outright baggage depending on a person’s family of origin, but also because of what the term family naturally implies. There is usually a deep bond among family members, but there is also a really high bar for incorporating new people. In other words, outside of birth, families are notoriously difficult groups to break into. For instance, going to someone else’s family holiday dinner could be a rather awkward experience for many people because your lack of knowledge about their customs, history, and dynamics will mark you clearly as an outsider.

That can be true of church families too. Think about what it is like when someone shows up on a Sunday to join in our family meal – not knowing whose seat not to sit in, when the right time is to stand up to go get the food, who doesn’t interact with whom for unspoken reasons, or what the proper manners and customs are for partaking in the meal itself. We recognize this in our church tradition – that it can be hard for newcomers and they might never fully belong, because we have a term for people who inherently belong. We call them “cradle Episcopalians.” The term marks those who are natural children of the faith. I know the weight of that phrase because I am not one. Other traditions have this too. One of my favorites is in the Quaker tradition where they use the term “Birthright Quaker.” I think it’s interesting because they just name that it has to do with blood lineage.

I bring this up in relation to today’s epistle reading. The apostle Paul is also using a family analogy for faith community. But he has a different way of discussing who is part of the family – actually a rather radical way. He reminds us that all children of God are adopted children. There are no bloodline family members among us, and yet, we are all still full heirs of everything. He talks about belonging as having the “spirit of adoption.” This was one of the notable things about this new Christian religion, and one of the things that got Paul in trouble. Jews, like pretty much all other religions of the day, had connected the growth of their faith tradition with passing it on to their children. This was true even of the Jews who had chosen to follow Jesus as early Christians. That is part of why the other leaders get upset with Paul and are wary of him. He is simply adopting in Gentiles to the tradition, forming family where none existed, breaking known and accepted boundary lines. They get upset with him because he wasn’t even forcing these newly adopted members of the family to follow family traditions – liking keeping kosher or getting circumcised.

Paul was opening up the family and they wondered where the boundary lines were anymore. But Paul was purposely blurring those lines. He was far less concerned with building clears walls than he was with focusing on what was at the center of the faith. He wasn’t creating a free-for-all. He was trying to remove barriers, in the same way he thought Jesus had, but he was intensely concerned on whether people were focused on the right thing. He said that the children of God were those who were led by the Spirit of God, and who hoped in the future that our faith pointed us to. In other words, he didn’t care to define this community by some sort of boundary, but whether our gaze was all focused on the same thing – the Christ at the center, whether we all hoped and strived toward the same future, whether we were willing to give our lives over to being led by the very Spirit of God, wherever it may take us.

Paul’s understanding wins out. Christianity would be completely unconcerned with lineage, and instead would actively seek to include those at the boundaries, and simply turn them to the center, help them to focus on the hope that the faith was built on. Actually, adoption becomes one of the primary things that early Christians are known for; they are willing to take in other people’s children, who are not part of their bloodline, and call them family, make them family and even heirs, by a shared purpose and vision and Spirit. The Christian faith through the ages was able to spread precisely because of this understanding, because it could take in new people, whole new people groups even, through adoption if they were willing to be called children of God and led by the Spirit.

This is an important part of our heritage, of our understanding of our faith, for us to think about today. We live in a fractured world. We see this in a number of ways. There is renewed tribalism, for lack of a better term, that prizes lineage and bloodlines, and wants to define family with hard boundary lines. There is a broken sense of family for a whole host of reasons – parents that have split, teens that are rejected by the families because of some aspect of their identity, young people living far from any relative because they have moved to take a job, or grandparents whose children have all moved away even as they long to hold them near. And, there is a profound loneliness, even as we are more connected than ever, we are forming more surface-y bonds that fail to meet the deep needs of interdependency that we were created for. All of these realities of modern life cry out for a new sense of family, for a renewed focus on the ancient Christian understanding of how we make family, for a refocus on the spirit of adoption that can make us one family of God’s children.

The first step for us is to actually want that to be our understanding of family. We must be far less concerned about boundaries and barriers, and far more concerned about adopting people in and helping them to focus on the vision of hope in a reign of God that is tangibly different from what seems to reign in the world now. Every family has boundary markers that delineate who’s in and who’s not likely to ever be. Sometimes they are spoken, and sometimes they are simply known and that is part of what makes the boundary. This church family is no different. Its past boundaries have had to do at times with actual family lines, at times with social class, and at others with worship style and preference. Those things are understandable from a human perspective, but what seems clear from the gospels is that God doesn’t care about any of them. In this family, God gets to do the adopting, and we simply need to be the family the welcomes people in and helps them to focus on the one at the center of our family.

We need to actively reach out in hope for others, to gather in those who we know long for this sense of family. The greatest thing about this type of family is that anyone has the potential to be adopted. We should be working towards that goal, to heal the splintered and fractured reality of our world. We should be looking at our neighbors, gazing out on our world, with the joyful expectation of a child who waits for a new brother or sister to be added to the family – someone else to play with and make our joy more complete.

And finally, we need to strive towards the hope that Paul speaks of. All creation groans in wait for it, and so do we. We have to actively move in hope toward the future the God calls us to. It is not Pollyanna-ish to hope no matter what the circumstances. Rather it is Christian. Archbishop Desmond Tutu described it this way: “Hope is being able to see that there is light despite all of the darkness.” We acknowledge the darkness, but we turn ourselves to focus on the light. It is one of the most attractive things about the family of God – we always believe that a better future is not only possible, but inevitable. This is what is compelling about our faith. It is what others need to hear and understand. And the only way they can do that is if we are actively striving towards that hope.

God makes family, where none exists. It is one of the great miracles of our faith. It was true of Jesus and his rag-tag group of early followers. It was true of Paul and his far-flung missionary efforts. And it must be true for the church today. We will welcome in the adopted, we will make new family, and we will hope in that vision until it becomes a complete reality. Amen