

The First Sunday after Christmas
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
26 December 2021

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

The process of adoption is not an easy one. There is a great deal of anxiety throughout the process, not to mention the paperwork, court hearings, and meetings with lawyers and Social Workers. There is something miraculous and magical that happens after all the prayers have been answered and that final hearing takes place, however. From that moment on and forever, God grafts into a family a branch not originally from that family. And, with the mighty action of a judge marking ink on paper, all at once your prayers are answered, and a child becomes God's gift to you to love, to care for, to fuss over, to educate, to correct, and to pray for. All at once and forever he or she becomes yours and you become theirs, and in the eyes of God and the law there will never be a difference between this child and any other children that came before or those who will come after. All at once, he is yours and you are his, and both you and he are given legal rights we did not have before. This is at once miraculous, magic, and utterly terrifying.

Today's reading from Galatians uses the metaphor of adoption to describe the relationship that we, the followers of Christ, have with God, our Father. Before Christ came into the world, the Law, provided the only framework for a possible relationship with God. If you wanted to have a relationship with him, then all you needed to do was to follow the ten commandments and the six-hundred-thirteen rules of life derived from them. The Law was our disciplinarian because the Law provided the boundaries within which that relationship with God took place. A relationship with God was only possible if the person followed the commandments, the liturgical and sacrificial mandates, the local traditions imposed by the religious authorities of the day, and even the local customs of their own house or tribe. Life was regimented to an extreme: There were approved ways to worship rightly; approved sites where worship was to take place; dozens of regulations regarding the Sabbath and the appropriate way of cleansing the vessels and cooking utensils used for sacred meals. There were also dozens of regulations that prescribed the appropriate relationships among people, and between people and God, and hundreds of regulations that controlled civil life among the citizens of the nation. So, to have a good relationship with God a righteous person had to be an observant Jew, always mindful to fulfill all the requirements of the law at all times. The Law was the disciplinarian. It was always there to tell you what to do and to render swift judgment when you failed to do it.

As a disciplinarian the "Law" was merciless, even if effective. An eye for an eye was the law; the spiritual and physically impure were ostracized and limited to live on the margins of society; the death penalty was imposed for a variety of crimes, which to us today seem barbaric; etc. It was so extremely difficult to satisfy all the requirements of the law that a double standard became the norm for many. On the surface they did the right things and said the right things, but in the secret of their hearts there was no love for

justice and no love for the Lord, and many acted wickedly in secret. Hypocrisy and self-righteousness became the norm, especially for many in positions of high power. Unable to satisfy the law, the people had become slaves of the law. Always trying so hard to fulfill all its requirements, always coming up short, always feeling guilty and rejected by God, and always caught up in the anxiety and the fear of being found guilty in the eyes of the Religious authorities of the day.

Paul tells us today, “Before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed.” The law served a purpose of keeping us under guard and teaching us to differentiate between right and wrong. But the Law was always intended to be a temporary solution. God had intended from the beginning of creation to liberate us from the slavery of the law, by providing us with a better way to atone for our sins, and to re-establish a proper relationship with him. In Paul’s words, Christ is that better way, “Christ came, so that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.” Christ came to redeem us from the law, “So that we might receive adoption as children... So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.” Before Christ, the only way to earn our salvation was total and absolute obedience to the law, an act that is impossible. With Christ, salvation is a free gift given to us as our inheritance. Why do we inherit this? Because in Christ Jesus we have moved from being slaves to being adopted children of God and heirs of his kingdom.

The Theologian J.I. Packer states that God’s fatherly relationship with Jesus implies four things: authority, affection, fellowship, and honor. All this extends to God’s adopted children as well. In Jesus Christ our Lord, we are under the authority of God. Within that authority God allows us a fair amount of freedom and independence, but a proper relationship with him always requires that we respect his authority. Jesus is a primary example of this in his quest to always be obedient to the Father’s will (1 John 5:1-3.) Second, a proper relationship with God requires affection. God loves us immensely and he demands our love and our devotion (John 16:27). We see this clearly in Jesus’ relationship with the Father, whom he calls “Abba” (Daddy!) often. Next, a proper relationship with our Father requires fellowship. He accompanies us in our daily journey and he wants us to spend time with him in fellowship and prayer (1 John 1:3). Jesus is a perfect model of this for us as well. Throughout his life of prayer, Jesus was in constant fellowship with the Father and the Father was always there for his son. Finally, a proper relationship with God, our father, requires honor. God honors us as his creatures, and he expects us to honor him as our Creator and our loving father. God intended to honor his Son, and in turn his son, our Savior, honored his heavenly Father in all he did (John 12:32; 17:24.) A proper Father-Son relationship then requires authority, affection, fellowship and honor (For more about this, please read “Your Father Loves You”, by James Packer. Harold Shaw Publishers, 1986.)

Today, during the first Sunday after Christmas, we celebrate the birth of our Messiah in human form, from a humble peasant girl, to provide for us a better, a more

perfect means of restoring our relationship with God, our Father. Through his death and resurrection, we are no longer slaves, wholly dependent on ourselves for our salvation, but adopted sons and daughters of God, heirs of God's kingdom and inheritors of the free gift of God's salvation through faith.

I invite you today to assess your relationship with God. And I invite you to answer the following questions in your heart: Do you respect God's authority? Do you show your affection for him often? Do you spend time with him in fellowship? And, lastly, do you honor him daily in the way you lead your life? If the answers are not a resounding "yes," don't be too anxious. Remember that you are no longer slaves to the Law. Simply open your heart and invite the Lord in. He will do the rest.

Let us pray,

Thank you Lord that through your Son you have adopted us to be your sons and daughters and to be heirs of your kingdom. Help us to be grateful for the free gift of the salvation you have given us in him. In Jesus name we pray, Amen!