

**HEIRS**  
Romans 8:12-17

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Trinity Sunday, June 7, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**FOCUS TEXT**

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For 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. 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—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.*

A great deal of the Bible comes our way through stories.

- Moses leading the people of Israel across the Red Sea with Egyptian chariots mired in mud.<sup>1</sup>
- The widowed Ruth committing to her widowed mother-in-law Naomi: “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God.”<sup>2</sup>
- Jesus telling consecutive parables of a lost sheep, a lost coin, and a lost son, with parties accompanying each finding.<sup>3</sup>

We also relate to the Bible through its many sayings:

- Pride goeth...before a fall.<sup>4</sup>
- ...in an abundance of counselors there is safety.<sup>5</sup>
- Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day.<sup>6</sup>

By contrast to these stories and sayings, the letters of Paul – especially his most dense letter Romans – contain theological writing that is often difficult to read or hear. The arguments can be dense and abstract; the terminology foreign; and the road to the end not always apparent. When we travel down such a theological highway, we try to move through town quickly, and hope not to get ticketed for speeding.

To render Paul more accessible, preachers sometimes select one verse and preach on that. There are many wonderful choices:

- ...all things work together for good for those who love God...<sup>7</sup>
- Love...bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.<sup>8</sup>
- There is no longer Jew or Greek...slave or free...male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.<sup>9</sup>

Any of these is worthy of the thousands of sermons they have spawned throughout history.

But one-verse preaching runs the risk of converting Paul’s theological discourse into proverb or saying. The power of his argument can be lost in the beauty or brevity of the maxim. So rather than lift one sentence from the six-verse passage before us today, I want us to follow the flow of Paul’s thought. As we do so we will be carried along not so much by our own skills at listening, but more by means of the images and metaphors Paul provides like stones in a creek bed we aspire

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 14:26-29.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth 1:16.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15.

<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 16:18 KJV.

<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 11:14 NRSV.

<sup>6</sup> Matthew 6:34 RSV.

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:28.

<sup>8</sup> I Corinthians 15:7.

<sup>9</sup> Galatians 3:28.

to cross. By moving from image to image, stone to stone, we can do justice to Paul's thought and his otherwise difficult language can come to life for us and our faith.

Let us pray: *O teach me, Lord, that I may teach the precious things Thou dost impart; and wing my words, that they may reach the hidden depths of many a heart. In the name of Jesus Christ I pray. Amen.*

## I.

In our passage, Paul uses five metaphors – one of them implied – to describe the relationship that can exist between a human being and God.

### (a)

The first metaphor is one that Paul names and then disowns: that of a slave. "...*you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear,*" Paul writes.

- No matter how intellectually sophisticated we are
- No matter how emotionally healthy
- No matter how accomplished

Deep in the human heart is a tendency to relate to God through a sense of obligation, a sense of fear, a sense of shame, a sense of guilt, a sense of being enslaved.

- Some in this room have experienced authoritarian governments where we have crouched in fear or hiding in order to survive.
- Some in this sanctuary have come from authoritarian religious traditions, where guilt and shame have led us to crouch in fear if not before God directly at least before God's representatives on earth.
- Some of us have come through experiences of intense suffering, victimization, abuse, that have led us to crouch in fear before people or events – or reminders of people or events.

A woman once shared with me that many years after divorcing her alcoholic husband, a knot would still form in her stomach every evening around 5:00 p.m. because for many years the knot formed out of her wonder whether or not he would come home for dinner that night – or for that matter – come home at all. Even though the cause for her fear had vanished with her divorce, her body still reacted as if the cause were present.

To any fear – religious or human, real or imagined, present or remembered – Paul says: "...*you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear...*" He names slavery and then disowns it.

### (b)

Paul's second image is unstated but grows out of the first. This image is that of a free human being. If one is not a slave, by definition, one is free. Unfettered, untrapped, unimprisoned, unvictimized, unguilty, unobligated, unfearful.

But notice that initial freedom is only a negative concept...an absence of slavery or tyranny but with no intrinsic content of its own. To be free only says we are *not enslaved*; it doesn't say what we *are*.

Several times in my life I have picked people up when the time has come for them to be released from jail. If they have a family awaiting them, a job to which to return, a warm shower and bed, their new-found freedom already has some content to it.

But if they leave jail with only the few dollars the warden has given them, and no family or halfway house awaiting them, they are utterly alone, and whatever content to life awaits them, they have to develop themselves.

Spiritually, some of us are akin to prisoners released from jail with nowhere to go.

We have been set free from a negative or authoritarian religious past, but we are walking down a dusty road alone. We have yet to develop our new religious life, one that belongs to us and contains our beliefs, our commitments, our faith. We still define our faith by what we don't believe, not by what we do believe.

Just as people released from jail cannot live as solitary individuals, those of us who have found freedom from religious fear must develop new beliefs, new practices, new experiences. Though freedom is a valuable gift, it alone will not provide our next meal.

(c)

Paul's third, fourth, and fifth images occur quickly after his images of slave and free person. His next images all involve family.

To the solitary individual walking down the road, Paul says: "...you have received a spirit of *adoption*."

Then he writes:

When we cry, '*Abba! Father!*' it is [God's] very [adoptive] 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...

Notice the family roles in these few sentences:

- Adoptee
- Parent
- Child
- Sibling
- Heir
- Joint-heir

In the quick movement of one paragraph, Paul is saying that we are not just a lonely ex-prisoner walking along a dusty road. Rather, we have been released into a family.

- We have been adopted.
- We cry to God with the name "Abba," the most intimate language we can use for a parent.
- We are a child in a family of children of God.
- We have siblings, one of whom is Christ.
- We have an inheritance.

The movement is from slavery to freedom to child to sibling to heir. Five metaphors. Five stones to help us through this passage, to help his cross this creek bed.

## II.

So what do we do with these images and this movement?

Through these *metaphors*, Paul describes *movement* into and within Christian faith.

- We move from being a slave: to God, to the church, to another person, to the past.
- We are set free.
- But in our freedom we do not follow the dusty walk of the ex-prisoner. We are not alone; rather we are adopted into the family of God. We have parents. We have siblings. We have an inheritance.

Martin Luther said of this passage: "It is good that this text were written in letters of gold; so admirable is it, so full of comfort."<sup>10</sup>

*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...*

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, translated from the Sixth Edition by Edwyn C. Hoskins (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), 295.

### III.

Were you lucky enough to have the kind of minister who judged every sermon and hymn, every anthem and worship service by how “good” it made you “feel,” I would end the sermon now, move to Lemonade on the Lawn, and receive your praise at the door for my “feel good” brevity.

But you are not so lucky. Years ago I learned – from Chaucer no less – that the meaning of my name – Hayward – is “ward of the hay.” I am the one responsible for bailing, and my main tool is the pitchfork. Leave it to the inheritance of my name for me to notice that Paul doesn’t stop with words that were “written in letters of gold” and area “full of comfort.”

Rather, Paul concludes his paragraph of metaphors and movement with a challenging statement: “...if, in fact, we suffer with [Christ] ... we may also be glorified with him.”

Being a child of God, being a sibling of Jesus Christ, being an heir in the household of God involves entering that mysterious place where, like our sibling Christ, *suffering* and *glorification* are linked.

We are not the kind of heirs who show up at the attorney’s office for the reading of the will, learn that we have inherited the summer home, as we expected, move our things in and enjoy it carefree the rest of our lives.

On the contrary, from our sibling Christ, we receive a more complete and complex heritage: one that involves not only living but also *servicing*, not only celebrating but also *suffering*, not only rising but also *dying* with and in Christ.

- Our suffering is neither that of a slave nor solitary ex-prisoner.
- Rather, our suffering is that of an adult child in a healthy family, one who joins her siblings and co-heirs to make a difference, often at great cost to themselves.
- Ours is a suffering which is unique to each of us yet whose origin lies in that of Christ.
- Ours is a suffering that *comes from* the strength of a heritage that passes *through* us *into* the lives of others.
- And ours is a suffering in which we put our stamp on the family heritage while taking that heritage into new territory.

In the mystery of who God is, in the mystery of who our sibling Christ is, Suffering also goes by the name “Glory.” Suffering is Glory’s middle name.

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Among the eight-thousand gospel hymns Fanny Crosby wrote in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one of her most familiar speaks a truth about the nature of being an heir:

*Heir of salvation, purchase of God,  
Born of his spirit, washed in his blood....*

We are “heirs of salvation,” which makes us happy, but our salvation comes at a cost – a “purchase” if you will – on the part of God, which makes our salvation deeper than mere happiness, perhaps marked by sadness as well.

We are “born of his spirit,” which lifts our spirits, but our birth, like all births and adoptions, is accompanied by an element of suffering, “washed in his blood.”

“Perfect submission...perfect delight,” wrote Ms. Crosby, herself blind, describing Christian commitment, Christian life.

“This is our story,” she wrote.  
“This is our song,  
Praising our savior, all the day long.”<sup>11</sup>

Glory and Suffering.  
Being a joint-heir with Christ.

Amen.

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<sup>11</sup> Fanny Jane Crosby, “Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine,” written in 1873. Hymn #341 in *The Presbyterian Hymnal: Hymns, Psalms, and Spiritual Psalms*. Ms. Crosby wrote the refrain in the singular; I have changed it to plural for the purposes of this sermon.