

Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Rev. Shelli Latham
“Adoption Certificate”
Mark 1:9-11; Galatians 4:4-7
Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 27, 2010

Mark 1:9-11

(9) In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. (10) And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. (11) And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

Today, we continue our sermon series on Galatians. As you've probably noticed, much of Paul's letter to the Galatians read a little bit like a verbal spanking. Paul is put out with the church in Galatia. The new Christian community is a bit like a baby giraffe, awkwardly trying to get its legs beneath it - to stand upright and figure out who it's supposed to be.

The Christian Church, at the time, is still very much a part of the Jewish faith tradition and worship life. So in their efforts to be faithful, the Galatian Christians have taken on rituals of their Jewish ancestors. Paul chides them, not so subtly, but Paul was often about as delicate as an agitated hippo.

The core of his message is that all these extraneous things - these rituals they feel bound to follow - like circumcision and celebrating the Jewish festivals - water down the gospel of Jesus Christ. He reminds the new believers that nothing we do wins God's favor or our salvation. In Christ, not in following the rule of the law, we are set free. We are saved by faith.

So let us turn to today's scripture, which reminds us once more that we are no longer slaves to the law. Listen now to a word from God from Galatians 4:4-7.

Galatians 4:4-7

But when the fullness of time had come, **God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, (5) in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.** (6) And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' (7) So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

Focus: We are chosen/loved.

Function: Freed to live as loved people.

When I was a teenager, I babysat a lot. One of the children who I spent quite a bit of time with was a little girl, conveniently named Christian. Christian was a strawberry, curly haired Shirley Temple of a kid, with peachy cherubic cheeks you just wanted to cup in the palms of your two hands and steel gray eyes that always hinted of her knowing a little more than you. Christian was adopted by her parents as an infant. When I would pray with her at night before tucking her in with her barricade of stuffed bears and ponies and baby dolls, she would say that charming, little kid prayer

that started something like, "Dear God, be with Meme and Granddaddy and Kathryn and Buttons and Aunt so and so and Uncle such and such, and please let me get a dog." It was that typical little kid prayer, except that always, always without fail Christian would fold her chubby little hands together and say, "Thank you, God, for my mommy and daddy adopting me because they love me so much." This was a child who knew, who was told, from the time she was t-tiny that it was no accident that she belonged to her family, to her parents. She knew she was chosen, she was beloved.

In our first scripture today, we get a glimpse of what it means to be God's beloved child. Another adopted child - one of divine ancestry but raised by a very human step-father named Joseph, stands waist deep in the Jordan River. We're only nine verses into Mark; Jesus hasn't done anything yet, at least not that we know of - no stories of healing the broken, teaching the yearning, bouncing eager children on his knee, no stories of feeding the hungry, riling the authorities, procuring salvation. Jesus stands waist deep in the Jordan just one good dousing by John separating him from the start of his ministry. He hasn't done much of anything yet, but as he breaks free of the surface of the water the heavens are ripped open like a piece of construction paper torn in two. And the Holy Spirit, all feathers and light, descends on Jesus like a dove, as the clouds rattle with the voice of God, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased." (Mark 1:9-11)

Jesus hasn't done anything yet. He hasn't given sight to the blind, fed 5,000 or honed his parable-telling skills. Before Jesus ever begins his ministry, he is marked by baptism and Spirit and the familiar voice of the one he calls Father. Jesus hasn't done anything yet, and still resounding love for God's child echoes from heaven like an affirmation bouncing off cavern walls, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

We are not Jesus, our lives, our actions, our rituals - no matter how faith-inspired and well intended do not win God's favor or earn us a spot in heaven. Jesus did that. It was his destiny, his purpose for being born. The apostle Paul reminds of this saying, "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were [also] under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children." (Galatians 4:4-5)

God sent his Son to live faithfully to the law as no other human could, to redeem us from sin, because we can't do it ourselves. In Christ's life, our lives, our very identities, are transformed. Once we were bound, but now we are free. Once we were slaves, but now we are children of God, heirs of the inheritance of heaven. We haven't done anything yet to deserve this legacy. We cannot do anything to earn this parentage, but God looks at us and calls us beloved and calls us God's own.

When I was young, I loved to visit my grandparents in Washington State. I grew up in Georgia, so flying to the opposite side of the country felt as exotic to me as going on safari in Africa. My grandparents had one of those silver, tubular airstream trailers in their garage that my brother and I could sometimes convince our parents to let us camp out in. And they had the perfectly sized crab apple trees for an uncoordinated pretend-pioneer girl to climb up and read a book.

The summer before I went off to seminary, I flew with my father out to his childhood home. The *huge* property with all its crab-apple climbing trees and miles of childhood adventure looked more like a medium-length gravel driveway with a small car port that once held a camper. But there was something about this place that **still** felt like it had held on to some secrets about my dad - who he was way before I knew him or he knew me.

My father was adopted by my grandparents when he was 8 years old. He had this whole other little life before he became Edward Latham - before he helped my grandpa move and rebuild the house they lived in, before he became a big deal high school wrestler and football player, before he learned to make the best chicken cacciatore or tried to teach me to do a cartwheel. Even now, eight years seems like both a short, little time - just enough to get you to third grade, and a long, long time - enough to make you a person. And all the secrets of my dad that his childhood home had tucked away . . . it didn't know any about those first 8 years - at least I thought.

My grandfather had died, and we were attending to details. My dad and I were standing in the kitchen with papers everywhere, the filing cabinet emptied out onto every surface. Now, everything about this house was simple - simple, peeling, yellowed-with-age linoleum floors; simple, non-descript green painted cabinets, a lonely single bar stool pulled up to the plain-Jane counter top, beneath a window looking out onto the backyard.

What was not simple was the view. The backside of my father's childhood home was all windows, and a giant sheet of glass spanned the entire length of that unremarkable countertop - looking out onto a complexly beautiful stretch of water which reflected the mountains in the distance. My dad grew up on the Hood Canal, which ebbed and flowed with the Pacific Ocean tide with the occasional gift of a barking sea lion on my grandparent's rock-beach lawn. That's where we were standing - at the counter, by the giant window. We might as well have been standing on the shore of that blue gray canal, flip-flops in the beach stones, toes dipping into the lapping tide.

In the pile of legal stuff on the counter, my dad pulled out a dingy beige piece of paper with the word's Birth Certificate scrawled on the top. On it was printed his birth date, and his birth mother's name (which I had never known before), and in the spot where his name went, the words "Baby Boy Tickle." We both got really quiet when we found it, and my heart broke open for him (though I didn't tell him). My heart broke open that no one bothered to name that sweet little baby before he left the hospital . . . and so his birth certificate bore a generic classification instead of a name as if he was a generic human being.

I talked to my dad before I decided to tell all this today - worried that he would be self-conscious about me telling the vulnerable parts of his story, but that day didn't bother him the way that it did me. **He had found his family and his name**, and didn't feel concerned or insignificant that there was a time when he was without one.

And he was right (which he so often is). My father was never insignificant or inconsequential. He was claimed and loved by God long before he was Edward Latham and even before he was Baby Boy Tickle. He was and is God's precious child - eternally known and claimed and loved. I needed . . . the world needed . . . a label to put on him, a name to separate him out from all the others, but God did not need that. Because God already knew God's precious child, "This is my beloved, in whom I am well pleased."

God already knew my dad, God's precious child, God's beloved the same way God knows each one of us. It's why we baptize infants. Because before those beautiful babies can say God's name or sing *Jesus Loves Me*, before they were born or even dreamed of, God claimed them as God's very own. Just as God claims each of us.

Adoption is intentional. It is no accident that we are God's children. We don't just happen to be part of God's family. It was an active, high-price, choice by our grace-filled, redeeming God. We are adopted. We are chosen as God's own, and there's nothing we can do about it. The word, "chosen" has been co-opted. Our world tells us that the chosen are entitled, presumptuous, undeserving, singled-out. Maybe some of those are right at least a little, except that we are all chosen - every fallible one of us. That does not mean we are entitled. It means we are loved, that we are claimed, that we are God's.

There is this beautiful scene in the last episode of the television series, *Sex in the City*. (And maybe your hopeful would-be-pastor should save the *Sex in the City* references for a day when there are no ballots, but here goes anyway.) Mahogany haired Charlotte, the traditionalist of the fashionable four, longs to be a mother. She and her husband, Harry, have struggled with infertility issues and starts and stops along the adoption trail. It has been a long haul. One evening, Harry walks into the apartment. Charlotte is scurrying around the kitchen scooping moo-goo-gai-pan from little square take-out boxes onto china plates. "Hi, honey," she calls from the kitchen, "I'm a bad wife; I ordered Chinese."

Harry robotically enters the doorway, eye wide as if he had no presence of mind about how he got from the foyer to the kitchen. He is clutching a large manila envelope in two hands like a school kid about to deposit a report on a teacher's desk. "I got something from China too." His voice sounds far away. "They're giving us a baby."

Charlotte stammers and stutters and asks "How?" And Harry mutters something about their little girl joining the family in 6 months. And then he says, "Here she is," as he pulls a 5 x 7 photo from the envelope. The baby is dressed in a red sweat shirt. She has a puff of black hair like a startled baby chicken, with a tiny white head band and wide almond eyes. Charlotte looks at the picture and half nods, half cries. "That's our baby." she says. "I know it. That's really our baby."

Each of us is known and loved and claimed by God as God's precious child before we can do anything to merit such full embrace. Paul would remind us, not so subtly; that when we imagine any action on our part is necessary to win favor in God's heart that we water down the truth of God's radical grace. We are heirs of the kingdom of God, because through Christ, God claimed us, God chose us, God knew us before we were known and said, "That's my baby. I know it. That's really my baby." In our adoption, we are freed to live as treasured, intentional children of God, marked from the beginning by unmerited love. We are freed to grow lives shaped by gratitude and awe, to see one another as family, to hear the words which marked the beginning of Jesus' ministry and to trust that they also call to us, "You are my son. You are my daughter. My beloved. With you I am well pleased."