

**Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Davidson, North Carolina
Lib McGregor Simmons
Romans 8: 12-17**

**“Good News for Third Graders, Summer Journeyers, High School Graduates and the Rest of Us”
Journey Sunday
May 31, 2015**

Today’s Scripture lesson is drawn from Paul’s letter to the Church in Rome.

Paul’s theological perspective, not only in Romans, but throughout his writings, contains a profound paradox. The paradox is this: Christians can do absolutely nothing to save themselves, but they do have the awful ability to separate themselves from God’s promise of abundant and eternal life. (1)

In this excerpt from Romans 8, listen for how this Pauline paradox is expressed by means of two concepts: adoption and freedom.

Imagine what life was like in the first century Roman Empire where the original recipients of Paul’s letter to the Romans were living.

For well-to-do Romans, life was good. They lived in beautiful houses on the bucolic hills outside Rome, away from the hustle and bustle, the noise and the smell, of city life. They were foodies, throwing exclusive dinner parties and serving guests exotic dishes.

Poorer Romans could only dream of such a life. Sweating it out in the city, they lived in shabby, squalid houses that could collapse or burn at any moment. If times were especially hard, they might abandon newborn babies to the streets, hoping that somebody who lived up on the hill who was on his way home after a day of work in the city would spy the abandoned child on the roadside, rein his chariot to a screeching halt, scoop the baby up, and spirit him or her away into a better life. You see, Roman society placed a high value on producing offspring and heirs; under Roman law, adopted children had the same legal status and inheritance rights as biological children; and thus childless couples of means were often eager to adopt.

And what about religion in first-century Rome? It’s true, Romans had organized religion to the max. There were gods galore, but it was mostly a cultural thing. Some historians say that the real religion in Rome was sports! Rich and poor alike cheered their hearts out at the chariot races and the gladiator fights. It was their sports and their obsession with exercise followed by post-exercise schmoozing at the Roman baths that made Romans Romans, some say. (2)

If you had tapped the average Roman, rich or poor, on the shoulder as he walked down the street and asked him or her, “Are you a Christian?” you likely would have received this puzzled response, “What’s a Christian?” Christians were definitely a marginalized minority in first-century Rome.

Sounds a lot different than life in 21st century America, doesn’t it?

Not really.

We have something in common with first-century Romans in the gap between the rich and the poor. We have something in common with first-century Romans in our over-the-top devotion with sports.

And if you have read the recent Pew Research findings on religion in America, you know we have something in common with first-century Romans when it comes to religion.

“The Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing, according to an extensive new survey by the Pew Research Center. Moreover, these changes are taking place across the religious landscape, affecting all regions of the country and many demographic groups. While the drop in Christian affiliation is particularly pronounced among young adults, it is occurring among Americans of all ages. The same trends are seen among whites, blacks and Latinos; among both college graduates and adults with only a high school education; and among women as well as men.

To be sure, the United States remains home to more Christians than any other country in the world, and a large majority of Americans – roughly seven-in-ten – continue to identify with some branch of the Christian faith. But the major new survey of more than 35,000 Americans by the Pew Research Center finds that the percentage of adults (ages 18 and older) who describe themselves as Christians has dropped by nearly eight percentage points in just seven years, from 78.4% in an equally massive Pew Research survey in 2007 to 70.6% in 2014. Over the same period, the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or

“nothing in particular” – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%. And the share of Americans who identify with non-Christian faiths also has inched up, rising 1.2 percentage points, from 4.7% in 2007 to 5.9% in 2014...

The drop in the Christian share of the population has been driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestants and Catholics. Each of those large religious traditions has shrunk by approximately three percentage points since 2007. The evangelical Protestant share of the U.S. population also has dipped, but at a slower rate, falling by about one percentage point since 2007.” (3)

We may not yet be as much a minority as our first-century Christian counterparts to whom Paul wrote, but we are getting there!

And maybe that isn’t such a bad thing, because perhaps our increasingly minority identity can serve to sharpen our hearing of the good news that Paul has to tell.

Take the concept of adoption that Paul uses in the passage that has been read.

When first-century Romans, especially those who were poor as many of the first-century Roman Christians were, heard Paul’s reference to adoption, their thoughts were likely drawn to the abandoned child on the side of the road scooped up by an eager couple and taken to the secure and prosperous house on the hill where they would never have to be hungry again.

And, do you know what, I believe that the image of adoption is just as powerful for us as it was for them. For what human being hasn’t in the 21st century at times felt like an abandoned child? In a culture that places so much emphasis on performance and achievement and amassing more money, more power, and more stuff. What human being hasn’t at times felt like a failure?

The gospel announces good news which speaks to the abandoned, cast-off child that is curled up in a fetal position inside every human being at one time or another.

The good news is: You have received the spirit of adoption!

Last Sunday Robert Alexander told us the beautiful story of his friends Derek and Beth and how when they adopted their daughter Reshma for whom they had waited for more than two years, Derek said, “she is the most beautiful child that I have ever seen.”

This is precisely the relationship between God and us that Paul is describing in today’s Scripture lesson. Paul talks about how the Spirit of God is living in each of us, and so we are assured that we are God’s beloved children. And so he says, like beloved children, when we cry out to God, we cry, “Abba, Father.” It is the address of a beloved child to a loving parent. It is the language of family intimacy. God is the one who is merciful to everyone in every way.” (4) When we say “Abba, Father,” it’s us jumping into God’s lap when God says, “You’re the most beautiful child I’ve ever seen.”

Let me go one step further. When Jesus established the church, he intended the church to be a community where the abandoned child inside every person feels safe. We acknowledge that not every church is like that, and indeed some would say, with good reason, that the fact that the church has often been a setting for a misuse of power which has led to pain and abuse of children and adults has led to the decline of the Christian church in North America. This church, however, prays to be and aims to be, a safe place for every child of God. And so I offer a particularly direct word to those of you who may be holding a secret in a dark and moldy closet, a secret that has kept you from experiencing God’s full Spirit of adoption, bring it to one of the ministers here—to Robert, to Mary Margaret, to Stephanie, to Sonia, to Leslee, to me. You will find a safe place where you will not be judged. You will find a safe place with our Stephen Ministers where you will not be judged. And do you know why, because we’re just as broken and scared and over-whelmed at times as you are. If you can’t quite yet let that secret out into the light and air of God’s grace and healing, that is okay. Write it on one of the prayer cards anonymously, and you will be bathed in the healing balm of prayer by our intercessory prayer group which meets every Wednesday.

We will pray for the day when you and all human beings with you will find freedom.

Freedom, you see, is the culmination of the good news which Paul proclaims.

When one knows the spirit of adoption, when one feels truly safe in God’s love and mercy, then this spirit of adoption becomes the launching pad for sharing this good news with others.

Romans 8: 14 reads, “for all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” That’s a timid translation from the Greek, Ernst Kasemann says. But Paul was not so timid as his translators. Had he spoken English, Paul would have said, “for all who are *driven* by the Spirit are children of God.”

We are sent forth every Sunday with the words, “As you go out into the world, live as *free* people.”

And you know, I think that we are always learning what it means to be driven by God's Spirit out into the world. In the midst of our messy, scared and scarred lives, we are always learning what it means to live as people who are truly free.

I know that I'm still learning.

On Friday, I had the privilege of participating in the leadership of the memorial service for John Lyles. In preparing for that service, I was still learning as I reread the sermon that he had preached in Marion, South Carolina, in 1957, a sermon which included the lines, "There is no biblical support for enforced racial segregation. There is no support for it in the Standards of the Presbyterian Church. There is no support in the history of the universal church," (5) and remembered that preaching that sermon led to his being asked to vacate his pulpit, a scary thing for a young pastor and his wife with a young baby.

John was a person who was definitely in the minority in his small southern town, and yet he could not be silent for he was driven by the Spirit to proclaim the good news that every person is loved unconditionally by God.

And, you know, I think that seeing ourselves as we really are, that is, a minority in our culture, actually helps us to be free. We become free of the delusion that we can save ourselves.

The power is God's alone. The power is God's alone and God's power is out there loose in the world, and all we have to do is charge out into the world grab hold to it.

And that, my friends, is good news. It is good news for third graders. It's good news for people heading out on mission trips, camps, and conferences. It's good news for people graduating from high school and heading off to college. It is good news for all of us.

(1) Richard P. Carlson, "Romans 8: 12-17," *Interpretation* LVIII, No. 3, July 2004, 280.

(2) "The Roman Empire in the First Century," www.pbs.org/empires/romans/empire/life.html. Also, Helmut Koester, *History, Culture, and Religion of the Hellenistic Age* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995), 65, as cited by Elisabeth Ann Johnson, "Waiting for Adoption: Reflections on Romans 8: 12-25," *Word and World* XXII, No. 3, Summer 2002, 309.

(3) <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape>.

(4) Alan Brehm, "Majestic and Merciful," www.thewakingdreamer.blogspot.com, June 6, 2012.

(5) John S. Lyles, "Amos Diagnoses Our Southern Sickness," in *The Unsilent South: Prophetic Preaching in Racial Crisis* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1965), 24.