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Sermon: “We are Children of God” (Romans 8:14-17)

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Here in Charlottesville today is commencement, or Final Exercises, at the University of Virginia, which marks a turning point in the lives of those graduating, whether they are graduating *summa cum laude*, *magna cum laude*, *cum laude*, or simply “Thank you, Laude” ☺. At commencement the relationship of the student to their school is changed—they are no longer students, but alumni.

In the church today is the Feast of Pentecost, when we remember and celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the church. Scripture tells us, “When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability” (Acts 2:1-4). This outpouring of the Holy Spirit changed the lives of all the believers present.

In some parts of the church when it comes to the Feast of Pentecost there is great emphasis placed on speaking in tongues. I have been in many worship gatherings in which there were people worshipping or speaking in tongues. Sometimes this can be beautiful and moving as people are praising God and praying and you can sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in an almost tangible way. At other times it’s just plain bizarre. I was actually at a service once when the pastor was trying to get those in the congregation who had never spoken in tongues or been given a prayer language to “prime the pump” by repeating phrases like “I bought and sold a Honda” over and over again until the prayer language came—no joke. While I believe the Holy Spirit does indeed give some believers a prayer language, as I’ve experienced in my own life, overemphasis on this can be less than helpful. In some charismatic church settings in there are essentially two classes of Christians, those who are considered “Spirit-filled” because they speak in tongues or have a prayer language and those who are not because they don’t.

As we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost today I’m preaching about something the Holy Spirit does in the lives of *all* believers, from those who were there at Pentecost to those who are right here right now, from those who have experienced speaking in tongues or have been given a prayer language to those who don’t know what to think about all that. I’m preaching about how the Holy Spirit assures us that we are children of God.

The Holy Spirit assures us that we are children of God. In today’s reading from Paul’s Letter to the Romans we read:

“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” (8:14-17a)

There is a longing in all of our hearts for a loving relationship with our Heavenly Father, which is one of the reasons why our relationship with our earthly father is so important and has such a lasting impact on our lives. Last week Paul mentioned in his sermon some of the devastating effects that can result if children do not feel loved by their earthly parents. When I ask people about their relationship with their father I get all sorts of responses. Some smile and speak well of their father and recount stories and anecdotes of different ways their father showed them love and compassion. Some speak of the father as their hero, the greatest man they know. Others become visibly angry and describe how their father was not there for them or had checked out. Others simply don’t want to talk about it and still others can’t talk about it—they cry instead.

For most people their relationship with their earthly father is marked by a mixture of good and bad memories, of healthy and unhealthy dynamics. The point is that our relationship with our earthly father impacts our lives and reveals the need that all of us have of a relationship with our Heavenly Father.

There is an alternative band called *Paramore* that has become popular recently (my teenage daughters keep me posted on these things 😊). One of their recent hits is a beautiful and emotionally charged song called *You are the Only Exception* which reflects both the impact of our relationship with our earthly father and our longer for real love. The lead singer of *Paramore*, Hayley Williams, sings:

When I was younger I saw my daddy cry and curse at the wind
He broke his own heart and I watched as he tried to reassemble it
And my momma swore that she would never let herself forget
And that was the day that I promised I'd never sing of love if it does not exist... But
darling, you are the only exception, you are the only exception

We all long for one person—be it our father or mother or husband or wife or boyfriend or girlfriend—one person who will be the only exception, one person who will give us unconditional love. We especially want it from our fathers. This longing never goes away. People who do not experience healthy love from their father will often look for a father figure in someone else. Some people do this their whole lives—they look for a father figure in someone else’s dad or an uncle or a professor or a coach or a priest or a counselor—they will search their whole lives long for someone who will give them what they need more than anything else, unconditional love. They are looking for more than a mentor; they are looking for a father

figure. The reality is that the only One who truly gives us unconditional love is God, our Heavenly Father. He is the only exception.

And it is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts to assure us that we belong to our Heavenly Father, that we are fully known and completely understood and compassionately cared for by our Heavenly Father, that we are unconditionally loved by our Heavenly Father, that because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ we have been adopted as children of God (past tense) and can therefore cry out to God, “Abba! Father!”

When Jesus taught his disciples what became known as the Lord’s Prayer, he taught them to address God as “Our Father” (Matthew 6:9). The Aramaic word Jesus used was “Abba” (not to be confused with the Swedish band that was recently inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame ☺). “Abba” can be translated as “Father,” but is even more accurately translated as “Daddy.” Abba was often one of the first words uttered by a toddler while bouncing on his father’s knees. Similarly “Mama” or “Dada” are often among the first words uttered by toddlers today (although for some exceptionally bright children their first word may be antidisestablishmentarianism, but that’s pretty rare ☺).

Addressing God, our Heavenly Father, as Abba is something Jesus taught because Jesus knew that ultimately, regardless of how healthy or unhealthy our relationship with our earthly father is, the only one who will give us the unconditional love we long for and need, the only exception, is God, our Heavenly Father. Jesus knew that no one on earth can give us that kind of love, and he emphasized this in telling the scribes and Pharisees on one occasion, “Call no one your father on earth, for you have one Father—the one in heaven” (Mathew 23:9).

It is the Holy Spirit who fills our hearts with the love of God. It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that we are children of God, that we can address the Almighty Creator of the universe as “Abba,” “Father,” “Daddy.”

Listen to what Martin Luther wrote about the word, “Abba” in his commentary on Paul’s Letter to the Galatians:

“It is but a little word, and yet notwithstanding it comprehends all things. The mouth speaks not, but the affection of the heart speaks after this manner. Although I be oppressed with anguish and terror on every side, and seem to be forsaken and utterly cast away from thy presence, yet I am thy child, and thou art my Father for Christ’s sake: I am beloved because of the Beloved” (Douglas Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 503).

It is the Holy Spirit who assures us that we are children of God. This was not an afterthought or plan-B for God, but part of his plan from the beginning. Scripture tells us, “(God) destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:5-6).

God predestined us to become adopted as his children through Jesus Christ because of his grace, his unconditional, one-way love. The grace of God changes slaves into sons and daughters. The grace of God replaces our fear with freedom. And this makes all the difference in the world.

This is brilliantly described by James Edwards in his commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans:

“The relationship of a slave to a master is ultimately one of fear. The law itself contributed to the status of servitude by making its promises on the basis of conditions, for conditions create anxiety and fear. When humans fail to meet conditions, as they inevitably do, they find themselves condemned. But grace cancels condemnation... indeed, grace short-circuits the whole downward spiral of law, sin, and death because grace is unconditional, that is, it is bestowed not on the basis of human merit but on the basis of God's love” (208).

Last weekend at the commencement for Trinity School for Ministry in Pittsburgh the Most Rev. Dr. Ben Kwashi, Archbishop of Jos, Nigeria, preached a remarkable sermon. He spoke about the suffering that believers in Nigeria have experienced, including the burning of churches and the murder of Christians, but beyond that he preached about the mercy and grace of God. He preached about how mercy is not receiving what we deserve and grace is receiving what we do not deserve. It is the Holy Spirit that assures us of the reality of the mercy and grace of God, the reality that we are the unconditionally loved adopted children of God.

This is all a free gift of God that costs us nothing, but cost God everything. The reason we can experience the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, the reason we can be assured that we are beloved adopted children of God, that we have been forgiven, that even in the face of death itself we have the hope of eternal life, is because of the ultimate expression of the unconditional love of God: Jesus Christ's death on the cross to atone for our sins. Scripture tells us that “God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). When God was the last one on your mind, you were the first one on his mind.

I recently read Nathaniel Philbrick's latest book, *The Last Stand*, a fascinating account of the Battle of the Little Bighorn between the Seventh Cavalry led by George Armstrong Custer and the Sioux and Cheyenne led by Sitting Bull. At one point in the battle a member of the Seventh Cavalry, Miles O'Hara, was hit. Listen to what happened next:

“Out in the middle of the skirmish line, about forty to fifty yards from the edge of the timber, Sergeant Miles O'Hara crumpled to the ground. He'd been hit and needed assistance. But no one was willing to go back for him. Private Edward Pigford never forgot the sergeant's final words. ‘For God's sake, don't leave me,’ O'Hara cried as the rest of the command ran for the safety of the trees” (184).

O'Hara's fellow soldiers ran away when he needed them most, and left him to die a horrific death at the hands of the furious Sioux and Cheyenne.

The good news of the gospel is that even before we crumpled to the ground because of the sin and pain in our lives, even before we found ourselves searching for unconditional love from a father or a father figure, even before we cried out for help, Jesus died on the cross for us. Jesus did not run for the safety of the trees; he carried a tree to Calvary, and died on it in our place. Jesus did not leave us to suffer and die alone in our sin; he came to us to save us, to make it possible for us to be adopted as children of God. In fact, the only time in the whole New Testament that Jesus is recorded as *not* addressing God as Father was as he cried out in dereliction from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Jesus was forsaken in our place. Jesus was abandoned in our place. Jesus was put to death in our place so that our sins could be forgiven of our sins—all of them, every single one, completely, 100%. Jesus did this because he loves us, because he wanted us to be changed from slaves to sons and daughters, because he wanted us to address God as "Abba, Father."

And after his resurrection and ascension Jesus did exactly what he promised his disciples he would do: he sent the Holy Spirit. So today, as we celebrate the Feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit that forever changed the lives of the believers at Pentecost, be encouraged. The Holy Spirit assures us that we are the beloved, adopted children of our Heavenly Father, the one who loves us unconditionally and proved that love once and for all in Jesus' death on the cross. The Holy Spirit assures us that when it comes to receiving unconditional love, God is the only exception. The Holy Spirit assures that because of the mercy of God we have not received what we deserve; and that because of the grace of God we have received what we do not deserve. The Holy Spirit assures us that we are children of God. That is a truth that can change our lives forever, even more than a graduation.

Amen.