

ADOPTED

Romans 8:12-25
A Sermon by Robert E. Dunham
July 29, 2018

The writer who tells the story is Pat Votava, who, when she is not writing, is a therapist in a center for medically fragile children in Columbia, South Carolina. And the story she tells is true...in some ways powerfully true. She tells first of a middle-aged woman whom she calls Mrs. Larson:

Mrs. Larson is a widow. Her husband was killed in the Vietnam War, and she raised her four sons and two daughters alone. When I met her, a social worker had just given her a gold-framed photograph. She was clutching the picture, tears running down her cheeks and saying "Thank you, thank you. I wanted this so I could see what Cindy looked like as a baby."

Becoming a foster parent was something Mrs. Larson decided to do after her own children were grown. Ten-year-old Cindy is her first foster child. She was placed in care after her mother beat her so severely that she almost died. The results of Cindy's physical abuse are massive. She can no longer speak or move her arms, legs or head. Although once an active child, she is now totally dependent on someone else for care.

Five days a week, Mrs. Larson pushes Cindy's wheelchair through the doors of [our center] to receive occupational, physical and speech therapy. A doll is often tucked in the crook of Cindy's arm, and her eyes dart around to see the other children. When her friend Jake arrives in his wheelchair, Cindy lifts her upper lip slightly as if to smile at him. The two children have become buddies during their therapy sessions.

A car hit Jake while he was riding his little red bicycle with the training wheels still attached. He strayed from his front yard onto a busy street. His parents were sampling and selling crack cocaine. They didn't know he was missing until the police came to the door to tell them he was in an ambulance. After many surgeries and months in the hospital, Jake too was placed in a foster home.

His first placement wasn't a good fit. After he had been with the foster mother for two months, she called the social worker. "It's too hard to take care of him. All that moving him from the wheelchair to the bathroom and the bed and half the time I can't understand what he is saying. I can't keep him anymore. I'm going to drop off his things."

An hour later, a lone brown paper grocery bag appeared on the sidewalk in front of our building. It contained one shirt, one pair of pants and a pair of underwear, the sum total of Jake's worldly possessions.

After spending several nights in the children's shelter, Jake was placed in a new foster home. Things finally went better for him, and the couple that took him in has since adopted him. When I saw Jake after the adoption I thought it was my imagination that he was sitting straighter in his wheelchair. The next day he seemed to be speaking more clearly when he said proudly to me, "This is my Dad."

In the following months, he began to use a walker, and now he no longer needs the wheelchair. He hated school and now he loves it. I asked him what changed and he said, "They don't make fun of me anymore and when I do have trouble my Mom and Dad go and talk to the teacher."

Life still holds its challenges for Jake, but now he has a safe and certain place to retreat to at the end of the day. He knows that if he stumbles while relearning to walk, he can call for Mom or Dad and they will be there to help him regain his balance.¹

And that's it, isn't it? It's what every child deserves. Adoption, at its best, offers to a child a safe and certain place to retreat in the presence of love, a place where he or she can find balance in life. Of course, not all adoptions work out great for everyone. Even the best intentions are not always rewarded, and we all know of unfortunate pairings of would-be parents and children. Of course, we know that those same unfortunate pairings also show up in birth families, too, at times, but they seem especially painful in families of adoption. A colleague of mine remembers a member of a former congregation, a mother, who consistently introduced her two teenaged sons by saying, "This is our son, Michael, and this is our *adopted* son, Jay." It was no surprise, my friend said, that it took Jay a long time to find some sense of belonging in life. "It was clear to him and to everybody else that he had been taken into their house, but not into their heart."²

We know not all families are exemplary. But we also know that when they do work, adoptions provide most gracious gifts to everyone involved, for what such families discover is that though their bloodlines may be different, they are deeply related by love.

That image, I think, was in the mind of the apostle Paul as he penned this section of his Letter to the Romans. Offering a profound word of comfort and hope,³ he says that we have all been freed from slavery to sin. And more than that, we have not been freed simply to go try to make it on our own, but have been welcomed into the household of

¹ Pat Votava, "Related by Love," *Skirt* (a Charleston, SC women's magazine), July 2002, as found at www.skirtmag.com.

² Christine Chakoian, unpublished paper on this text, presented to the January 2002 meeting of the Moveable Feast in Danville, California.

³ Chakoian; see note 2.

God as full members of the family, “as if we had been part of the family all along. We are home.” Says Chris Chakoian,

We may still experience suffering – the children of God are hardly exempt.... But our suffering doesn’t need to make us *afraid* any more.... We are the children of God, really, really, the children of God; so much so that the Spirit coaxes us to call God “Daddy”, so that when, in our suffering, we forget, the Spirit bears witness to us and reminds us who we are. We are the children of God, and heirs now, joint heirs with Jesus Christ, who has shared his inheritance with us.⁴

We, you and I, have been adopted by God. All of us. And that means that you and I, and God as well, are all related by love. Our adoption into God’s family is such a profound work of comfort, for we have been claimed as God’s own. That is also such an important word of hope, the kind of abiding, unshakeable hope that sustains the Christian life. Chakoian suggests that Paul’s phrase, “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear” has a counterpoint: we have all received a spirit of adoption to move forward into hope. Such hope, she says, is not dependent on the accomplishment of what we hope for, nor shaken by the fear that it will not be accomplished after all.

Hope is not a feeling or a decision or a tenet or a belief. Hope is simply that place in which we find ourselves, having been saved. For God has saved us; and nothing, absolutely nothing, can take it away from us. [As Paul will say only a few paragraphs later,] nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.⁵

That is not always an easy promise to claim for ourselves. We know that we fall short of expectations in this household into which we have been adopted. We are still feeling our way into the culture of God’s family, learning gradually the household rules: how to act and how to treat our new siblings with dignity and respect. In short, we are learning how to love and to be loved.

But, as Chakoian says, we are not learning alone: our sisters and brothers in Christ are here to help us.

And when we are afraid, or when we have slipped back into our old ways, or when we forget who we are, the Spirit comes to us, and whispers in our ear that no one is going to take us away, that we are really safe now, that we are really home now and won’t have to move again, that we are really loved, that we really belong.⁶

When I was thirteen years old my father died. It was a difficult time for our family, but we got by. And one of the reasons I did as well as I did was that, unbeknownst to me at the time, three men in our church conspired to become surrogate

⁴ Chakoian. See note 2.

⁵ Chakoian.

⁶ Chakoian.

dads for me. For the next five years at least one of them seemed to show up for every baseball game I played in, every concert our band gave, every church event in which I had a part. They called me. They took me out for ice cream. They inquired about my school work. In a sense, they adopted me as their own, and from them I got my first real taste of what it meant to be the church. It took me years to figure out that their actions were likely planned – a conspiracy of grace; I just thought it was what Christians did.

And the truth is, it *is* what Christians do. Whenever I baptize a child in the life of the church, in some way I always try to remind everyone that from that day forth, that child is no longer just the child of his or her parents but is now *our* child. You know now why that claim is so important to me. Every child is our child, just as each one of us is God's child, adopted into God's family. And it is our blessed task to make everyone feel safe within the shelter of God's love, for we are all deeply related by that love.

Of course, that task extends also to children of God beyond the confines of this church family. And that is why Christian churches across this land have found common voice in pleading for the tender care and re-unification of children separated from their parents and families during the government's anti-immigration crackdown. If every child is our child, adopted into God's family, then *those* children are our children, too – many of them baptized into the faith we claim – and we should be as alarmed at their mistreatment and as diligent in seeking their well-being as we are with our own children. Progress in the re-unification effort has been reported, but not enough, and the constant, distracting barrage of other news should not keep us from pressing the powers-that-be to continue to work for those children.

Let's turn once again to the war widow Mrs. Larson and her fragile foster-child Cindy, with whom we started? We left the story in the physical therapy room, with Cindy straining to smile at young Jake as he was wheeled into the room. Then a therapist came to take Cindy to another part of the room. Pat Votava shares with us the rest of the story:

"I've got some news for you," Mrs. Larson told me as soon as Cindy was out of sight. "I've been mulling this around for awhile. I'm going to adopt Cindy. Some of my friends think I'm crazy to take on a girl who will need care for the rest of her life now that my own children are grown. But when Cindy was in the hospital for her last surgery I kept hoping that her grandma or aunt or uncle would come see her or at least contact the social worker to find out how she was. They never showed up. This little girl didn't deserve what happened to her. She should have the chance to grow up in a home surrounded by people who love her...."

I don't know what power moves someone to adopt a child [says Pat Votava]. Somehow, they find a space in their heart they want to share. In the past five years of working with these families, I have been fortunate enough to see sixty percent of the special-needs foster care children adopted. Each time it happens I feel like I am watching a miracle occur.

“A family is a family,” said Mrs. Larson. “It doesn’t matter whether they bore you or they chose you. Everybody needs to feel like they belong somewhere, and I came to the conclusion that Cindy belongs with me. I’m sort of like a blood transfusion. New blood to give this child a new life.”⁷

You know, I can’t help but think that God must have been thinking something like that way back when he first sent the angel Gabriel to talk to that young girl Mary. I think it must have been some thought like that. New blood for a new life. And because of that wonderful thought, we have been given a new start, a new family, a new life. We really are safe now. We really are home now and won’t have to move again. We really are loved. We really belong. All of us. Really.

And if that is what we believe, then let’s lean and live into that truth, until every child – *every* child – can say the same.

⁷ Votava; see note 1.