



“CHILDREN OF GOD”

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Scripture: Galatians 4:4-7

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 under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.

I’m so very thankful for the chance to be back among you to preach this Sunday morning. I’ve grown up in this church and I’m at seminary because of the way this church has mentored and supported me. My interest in the work of ministry began when I was in middle school. We were raising money for the CROP hunger walk and the youth who could raise the most money would get to see the “Sound of Music” at the FOX Theater. I was motivated to fundraise for this contest first, because I loved the “Sound of Music,” but second because I was saddened by the thought that there were places where people sat down to tables with little or no food.

So with this in mind, I hope you will allow me to indulge in some stories about the tables where we gather to illustrate this week’s message.

When I was in college in North Carolina, it was much too pricey and difficult to fly home to Michigan for Easter and Thanksgiving break. Luckily, I had generous and hospitable friends who welcomed me to their respective family celebrations. It’s the closest I’ve come to knowing what it would feel like to be “adopted,” to having others welcome you into their family. It was always intriguing to see how other families celebrated the holidays and what happened around the holiday table. Sometimes I indulged in family traditions like Black Friday shopping or grilled mac and cheese sandwiches. Other times I witnessed family controversies.

At one holiday table I witnessed what happens when law trumps grace. Sitting around the table, waiting for the last of the dishes to come out of the oven, the mood turned rather sour. I was soon filled in that a family member had pulled in the driveway to be told that she was not invited to come inside to the table. Her family had disagreed with her actions and her punishment was being excluded from the family meal. Although exclusion might not look like a confrontation in the driveway, we have all excluded other or experienced being “forgotten” or not invited to a celebration. For some this is the reality they face each Christmas. Maybe this Christmas you experienced or witnessed those who were excluded from the table?

In Paul's letter to the Galatians, Paul is addressing a community who was being persuaded to adopt Jewish law. Early Christian converts were both faithful Jews who were persuaded by the message of Christ, and Gentiles, who came to faith in Christ despite not being from a Jewish background. Paul believed that the Gentiles did not need to follow the rules of Jewish law or become circumcised to be Christians, they only needed to have faith in Jesus Christ. At God's table it is not just those who follow the Jewish laws who are welcomed to the table, but all are welcomed. Jesus had come to redeem those who were under the law, therefore, no one was to be excluded from the table.

Holiday celebrations also often employ the use of a "children's table." The children's table in my experience is a card table or two that are set apart in another room (but within the glance of mom or dad!). My favorite "children's table" is when it's the primary-colored plastic table with the built in benches. Being seated at the children's table is sometimes due to the reality of big families that overflow from the dining room, but other times it's a division of maturity levels. Either way, we have to laugh when teens or even young adults still have their reserved place at the "children's table" rather than with the adults. As a child, there were times when you looked to the adult table with lustful eyes wondering when one might "graduate" to adulthood in the eyes of one's family.

In Paul's letter he writes that we are God's children, however we are not given a spot at the "children's table" but we are welcomed as heirs. An heir in Jesus' time was usually the eldest male child in a family. He was to be the next leading patriarch of that family, ready to inherit all that the family owned. As children of God, God bestows on us God's trust. Being adopted into God's family, we receive a spiritual maturity and receive the Holy Spirit to guide us. Paul believes that the Galatians are spiritually mature through the work of the Spirit, so there is no need for the law! We don't sit at the "children's table," we have been welcomed to God's table as heirs!

Around Christmas, our stories, songs, the prolonged darkness, and the colder temperatures tend to increase our affections and closeness for one another. Around the holidays, sometimes our tables are places of exclusion, but other times we experience an increased affection for one another. We light candles, make gifts, serenade Christmas ballads, maybe even sing Christmas carols for strangers! And so it goes that we use our words to express our affections for each other.

Paul writes that as children of God, we are granted the privilege of calling God "Abba," which means Father. Abba was used within family circles, as a term of affection. Even adult children would use the word "Abba" to address their parents. Paul wants to emphasize that although we are mature in faith, we still lean on our God like a child does their mom or dad. The impact of Paul's letter, claiming God as Abba, for first century readers would come with similar feelings, both positive and negative, to the idea of calling God our Mother today. It was a name for God that was not frequently used, an identity that was uncommon. It claimed God as an intimate and loving caregiver.

You may be calling God "Abba" more often that you realize! We call God "Abba" each time we prayer the Lord's Prayer, saying "Our Father." We pray not to some distant deity, but to the

familiar and intimate God, one who sent his son, Jesus, to live among us. In the Lord's Prayer we pray for God's kingdom to come, which welcomes a vision for radical hospitality for all people to be included at the table.

Sometimes our holiday tables are not filled with the family into which we are born. Sometimes our holiday tables are filled with in-laws, friends, co-workers, or even strangers. At Garrett-Evangelical, where I am studying to prepare for ministry, we are required to do two internships in different ministry settings – such as serving in churches, nonprofits, as chaplains in a hospital or nursing home.

This year I have been serving at University Christian Ministry, a campus ministry at Northwestern University. UCM meets in an old house. In the house is a large living room which we divide into a space for dining and a space for worship. It's not much larger than the Thomas Parlor. It's a beautiful sight to see so many students gather each Sunday night for a meal and time of fellowship. We become for each other an adopted family. The students around the table come from Texas, California, North Carolina and Michigan, all looking for community to call home. Often our tables are packed in tight, bumping knee to knee to fit in every chair possible. We want to make sure all are welcome. Our campus ministry director, Julie, often ponders, will people keep inviting their friends when it seems like no more chairs can be pulled around the table? How do we continue to welcome more and more people to the table?

This is a challenge we often face in our holiday dinners, one we solve by creating the kids table, or creating a Tetris board like jumble of card tables, or we relinquish people to eating on the couch or standing in the kitchen. Yet, there is a beauty in the image of being all pulled around one table, knee to knee. When stories are heard by all ears and laughter rises in unison.

This is the vision I have for God's kingdom, one of the ever-growing table, welcoming all God's adopted children to sit knee to knee. I imagine a big round table in God's kingdom where no one claims the superiority of the "head of the table" and no one is left alone on the opposite end or in another room. Rather all people have an equal place at the table and can view the beautiful diversity of the faces around them as the table grows ever larger.

At Christmas, we receive the good news that Jesus Christ was born. Jesus walked among us, and ate with us. Jesus sat knee to knee with people and told them the good news of God's love. Jesus sat knee to knee with a lot of different people – tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes, women, the sick, the blind, the dying. He welcomed the unwelcomed and cared for the unloved. What would Jesus' holiday table look like?

The church has a table where we remember our adoption into the family of God and take hope in the inheritance we receive as God's children and heirs. It is the Lord's Table, where we partake in communion. In the Methodist tradition we affirm that all are welcome to the table. We come forward to receive the grace of God for our shortcomings in our pursuit to love God and neighbor and we receive God's nourishment for our continued journey towards maturity in faith. The bread and the wine were common elements that people would have found at their dining tables. When Christ says to remember him every time you partake of bread and wine, he desires for us to commune with him daily.

Maybe the tables where you have feasted this holiday season have been visions of joy, filled with loved ones; or maybe places of heartbreak, absent of familiar faces. Maybe the tables you sat at were beyond expectation or fell considerably short. Nonetheless, the message of the Lord's Table is that God loves us – no matter how Christmas went, God loves you. God, through the birth of Jesus Christ, adopts all people as beloved children and heirs to everlasting life.

Finally, being adopted into a family is not without expectations. As children of God, we are called to invite people to sit with us at God's table. And it is not our place to hold the invitation to a certain standard. Like Paul's letter to the Galatians claiming that the law and circumcision are not pre-requisites to the table, so too we cannot create barriers based on gender, race, income, nationality, age, or any earthly prejudice. We are called to welcome all God's children to the table.

So this week, some of you might find yourself at a table, not with a fork in hand, but with a pen and paper (or computer) in the pursuit of creating some new year's resolutions. If so, I challenge you to this: This year, how will you individually and we as a church embrace our adoption as children of God, and in turn extend God's good news by welcoming others to God's family table?