

FOR EVER A CHILD OF GOD

Wisdom 12. 13, 16-19

Romans 8. 12-25

Matthew 13. 24-30, 36-43

I speak to you in the name of  the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Parents take better care of their attractive children than they do their less attractive ones. At least that's what an article in the 2008 edition of *The New York Times* reported that Canadian researchers discovered.

Researchers at the University of Alberta observed more than 400 parents' treatment of their children during 14 different trips to supermarkets. The researchers noted that the more attractive the children were, the more likely their parents were to belt them into a trolley seat. Homely children, on the other hand, were more often out of the sight of their parents, who frequently let them wander more than ten feet away.

Dr W Andrew Harrell, the executive director of the Population Research Lab at the University of Alberta and the research team's leader, saw an evolutionary reason for the findings. Attractive children, he insisted, get the best care because they represent the best genetic legacy. 'Like lots of animals, we tend to parcel out our resources on the basis of value', Harrell claimed. 'There are a lot of things that make a person more valuable, and physical attractiveness may be one of them'.

Of course, more study is needed to determine if, in fact, parents actually treat their attractive children better than they do their more homely ones. But as we consider our appointed epistle reading from Romans 8 this morning, some of us might be wondering what would happen if God treated his attractive children better than his less attractive ones.

Christians profess that Christ alone is the eternal, natural Son of God. However, we also profess that *we* are the adopted children of God, adopted by grace through Christ. If God were to treat his most attractive child – that is, our Lord – the best, then the rest of us, God’s adopted children who are considerably less perfect than Jesus, would be in much trouble.

Romans 8 contrasts living according to our sinful nature (called the ‘flesh’) with living by the Holy Spirit. We who are God’s adopted children confess that we have all too often willingly lived according to that sinful nature. We almost habitually choose our own righteousness over God’s righteousness, and disobedience over obedience.

However, according to St Paul, the author of the epistle to the Romans, to live according to the sinful nature rather than by the Spirit is to choose death over life. By contrast, to live by the Spirit (that is, according to God’s ways) is to choose life over death. Christ’s followers who let the Spirit put to death our natural inclination to disobey God choose the lively way that has meaning and purpose. We who imitate our Lord in our thoughts, words and actions live in a way that leads to eternal life.

But let us be brutally honest. Even though we are God’s adopted children, we cannot live by the Spirit on our own. You and I naturally choose to disobey God. Thankfully, God’s Holy Spirit does not leave us enslaved to the flesh and to our sinful nature. The Spirit graciously frees our wills; he gives us an identity as children of God; and he moves us (often, slowly and step-by-step) to obey God.

This change that the Spirit effects in our desires and our wills is accompanied by something that many of us often overlook: a new relationship with God, our Father; a new relationship with our heavenly Father that may seem inconceivable to us, given the relationships we had with our earthly fathers.

Some of us (and I include myself in this category) did not have the benefit of growing up with a father who was close to us. These things happen; they are part of life. And yet the Holy Spirit moves Christians to cry, ‘Abba, Father’, an emotional, passionate and intimate name for God. It is the same intensely personal name that Jesus used when he addressed his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane.¹ God’s adoptive sons and daughters have the right to refer to God in personal terms. Because of what Christ has done for us, God gives us the right to call the Creator and Sustainer of all things ‘Daddy’.

What’s more, God’s adoptive children don’t just have the freedom to gladly obey and call God ‘Daddy’. As Paul writes, ‘if we are children, then we are heirs, heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ’. Of course, we have not yet received our full inheritance. We will only be able to fully claim our inheritance in the future. Yet we Christians know what we will inherit. God’s adoptive children will inherit the free, unlimited and unrestricted enjoyment of God’s glory in the new creation as we share life eternally with him.

Dear friends, I know that the Christian walk is not always an easy one. There are ups and downs; there are hills and valleys. There are days when we freely give ourselves over to the Holy Spirit, so that we can walk in the way of life; and then there are days when we do not do that. We stubbornly cling to our sinfulness and choose deliberately to act like less attractive children.

Yet the truth is, once we are adopted into the family of God, we remain there. We do not lose our identity (or our birthright) as sons and daughters of the Father.

I am reminded of a true story,² one that happened in the Midwest of America, in a very ‘Reformed’ church. In that congregation was a man called Benny. Benny was

¹ Cf. Mk 14. 36.

² Sietze Bunning, *Purpaleanie and other Permutations*. Middleburg, Iowa: The Middleburg Press, 1978, pp. 55-57.

an alcoholic, but he regularly attended church. For three years, Benny had been under discipline: first a silent censure, then a more public censure that initially left his name out of the matter. Later it was announced publicly that it was indeed Benny who was under scrutiny. Three years is a long time to work with someone, and so finally Benny's persistent struggle with the bottle led the Reformed church (and God, apparently) to run out of patience. So a deadline was set, and when Benny was unable to meet that deadline by cleaning up his act and repenting of his wicked, boozy ways, a date was set for his public excommunication.

Benny attended his excommunication.

He even stood in the midst of the congregation whilst the pastor solemnly read the standard form that designated Benny a 'Gentile and a publican' with whom the church was to have no further association. Benny stood there and heard it all. It was not in protest (although the pastor thought so) and it was not in stupidity (although the congregation thought so) that Benny stood up for excommunication.

Like Jacob wrestling with God and saying, 'I will not let you go until you bless me', Benny was wrestling with his Reformed church and with God. Although he lacked Jacob's talent for articulation, Benny's standing there at his excommunication conveyed a strong message to the congregation. It was as if he were saying, 'I will not be cut off as though I do not exist. I am God's child; all right, I am God's naughty child, but I am still God's child, and my name is Benny'.

Until he died of cirrhosis Benny attended church as regularly as before, although he was ignored by everyone and was not allowed to partake of Holy Communion. The Reformed church is gone now. Its lumber was used for a cattle shed; but the place where Benny stood for his excommunication is for ever holy ground. Amen.