

Romans 8:12-17

“Abba, Father”

¹² So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. ¹³ For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. ¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

I’d like to begin by considering two pictures: one an etching and the other a painting. They are both by the same artist. They are both of the same subject. But there is a world of difference between them.

The artist is Rembrandt and the subject is the return of the prodigal son. In 1636, Rembrandt created a small etching of this scene. Then, 32 years later, he returned to the subject and painted a larger masterpiece, “*The Return of the Prodigal Son.*” When you contrast these two studies, one an etching and the other a painting, you notice a world of difference between the two.

In the etching, Rembrandt focuses upon action. The scene is filled with movement. People are descending a staircase. Some are watching their steps, one looks to the side, another looks downward, but all are rushing to join the father who has rushed out before them to lean over and embrace his son. The father, himself, is moving forward. Rembrandt catches him in mid-stride, as he rushes to reach out and grasp his son.

In the painting, however, the picture is different. Here, Rembrandt creates a sense of stillness. He focuses on presence rather than action. No one is moving. Everyone is stationary. And all of the people, whether standing or sitting, are gazing on one central experience. The father, leaning over his son; the son, leaning into his father. These two people, locked in an eternal embrace. It is as if time has stopped and one sees that moment, that eternal moment, when the father acknowledges, claims, receives, blesses . . . yes, loves his son.

This is a moment of sonship. Of being claimed as somebody’s child and Rembrandt sought to capture that moment and freeze it upon your memory.

I begin with that image, because, in our reading from Romans this morning, Paul does something similar. He has revealed to us Christ, our Deliverer. Now, he focuses our eyes upon God, our Father. Rescued by Christ from the power of sin, we are brought into the kingdom of God, where we live by the Spirit as children of God. We are children of God. That’s the main point Paul wants to communicate to the church at Rome and to us today. In Christ, God claims you as his son. God is our Father and we are his children. But what does it mean to be claimed as God’s son?

I. First Focus: Not a Slave but a Son (v. 15-16)

To answer that question, Paul creates a contrast. The contrast between slaves and sons. Paul writes, “*For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’*” Notice how Paul turns our attention to a moment of prayer. He asks the church to stop and consider what happens when we pray. Our words are suspended in mid-air – “*Our Father*” – and Paul wants us to hear them. Paul freezes that moment and asks us to consider what it means to be God’s son.

If you look closely at Rembrandt's painting, you can see what this looks like. Rembrandt places the son's head on his father's bosom and the father uses his hands to draw the son closer to himself. What is strange, however, is that the son looks less like a son and more like slave. His head is shaven, as if he were a prisoner. His eyes are closed as if he were exhausted. He brings all of his slavery there before his father. And the father reaches down to claim this slave as his son. He hovers over him in love. He places his hands upon his body and draws him to himself. The child brings slavery to his father, but the father brings sonship to the child. This child is no longer a slave but a son, not a prisoner but a child of God.

Henri Nouwen, a priest and devotional writer, once told about a time when he shared this picture with others. For him, the son looked like a prisoner, like the victim of a concentration camp with his head shaven. A woman, however, offered a different view. She looked closely at the painting and told him what she saw. It was not the head of a prisoner but that of a newborn child. With that comment, she captured the mystery of this moment. The one who has been a slave to his passions is made, by the love of his Father, into a son.

This is what the apostle Paul is celebrating in our letter from Romans. By nature, our sinful passions consume us and take us far from the kingdom of God. If we live according to the flesh, we will die. Exiled, imprisoned, thrust far from God's kingdom. God, however, has brought us to life in the death of his Son. God, the Father, sent His Son Jesus Christ out of love for His people. In dying, Jesus took upon Himself the exile of our sin. And, in rising to life, Jesus brings us into the kingdom of His Father.

Today, in Jesus, we bring our slavery before God. We confess the ways we have been less than God's children. The ways we have been enslaved to the experiences and rule of this world. God, however, comes to us in Jesus. He places His hands upon us and draws us near to His heart in love. Today, you are once again claimed by God to be one His beloved children. As Paul writes, *"The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God."* *The Spirit cries out with your spirit, "Abba, Father."*

The church has a way of reminding us of this moment. It's hidden away in our hymnals, buried deep within the minor details of liturgical action, but it is there none-the-less. I'd like you think about two moments in life, captured in the liturgy: the moment of baptism and the moment of dying. In the service of baptism and the commendation of the dying, the pastor does one simple thing. He places his hands on the person, whether that person is being baptized or dying, and he asks everyone who is gathered around that person to pray the Lord's Prayer. If you were baptized as an infant, you couldn't say the Lord's Prayer, but the congregation said it for you. If you are lying there, unconscious and about to die, you cannot say the Lord's Prayer but again the pastor and the church say it for you. Why?

Because God in this moment is coming and claiming you as His child. In baptism, as you are brought into the kingdom, the church offers you the Lord's Prayer. This is your prayer, your language to use to speak to God your Father. As you depart this world in the moment of death, the church gathers again to testify that you are God's. These are your words. God has given them to you as His child. Because you are in Christ, you can call God your Father and nothing, not even death, can take that away from you.

Later in this service, we will pray the Lord's Prayer. I'd like you to think about that moment. This is not just a repetition of a prayer that we say every week. Something to say without paying attention. This is the working of the Spirit. Even now, in our midst. God is

reaching out and placing His hands upon you, drawing you close to His heart, and the Holy Spirit is testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. From baptism to the grave and every moment in between, we cry out *“Abba, Father”* and rejoice that we are children of God.

II. Second Focus: Not a Debtor to the Flesh but an Heir (v. 12-14 and v. 17)

When Jesus taught us to pray to God, our Father, he also taught us to pray, *“Thy kingdom come.”* Paul’s words in our text remind us of this petition, as he writes, *“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him”* (Romans 8:16-17). Heirs of God. These words are necessary. So necessary in our world.

Daily we are bombarded by messages that try to take God’s kingdom from us. Open any magazine and take a moment to stop and look at the pages. Consider the advertisements. The pictures that draw you away from the things of God to the things of this world. Hair care products and cellular phones, fine clothing and fine food, vacation get-aways and luxury cars. The riches of this world are set on display before you. As you glance through the pages, the life you have seems less significant than the life you could have. With hard work, a bit of luck, a trip to the casino or a shrewd investment in the stock market, you will be able to leave your little life behind and live in the luxury of this world.

Words of God to His people to not covet the things of others, to love one’s spouse and one’s children, to be content with the calling into which you have been called, to rise and labor for the good of others, and to draw near to one another in the household of God – these words, this life, this church that God has made seems so outdated. It pales in comparison to the life that is promised us as we turn another page. America becomes the Promised Land. The place where we can indulge our desires, make something of ourselves, get ahead in this world, and, if we keep a little bit of religion in our back pocket, trust that we will be blessed in the world to come.

Being a child of God, however, means something other than accomplishing the American dream. Consider a moment in the history of Israel. Moses stood there before God on the mountain. Israel had sinned against God, aroused God’s anger, and God had threatened to destroy his people. Moses interceded for them and God listened to Moses. God, however, offers Moses a strange vision of life for the people of Israel. God says that they can have the Promised Land, the vineyards, the olive groves, the fields for barley and wheat, the pastures for cattle and sheep, the cities and the open spaces, all of the land flowing with milk and honey. They can have it. All of it. They just will have it without Him. God will not go with them into the Promised Land.

Moses, however, puts the magazine aside. He is not tempted by the glossy pictures. He knows that without God, they have nothing. What good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul? So Moses comes before God with nothing to offer. He simply relies on God’s mercy and prays, *“If your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here”* (Ex. 33:15). Moses will not have the kingdom without the presence of God.

If you listen to Paul’s words, notice how he focuses upon our relationship to God rather than things in this world. We are heirs, he says. Heirs of God. Not just heirs of a kingdom. We are heirs *of God*. God Himself has promised to go with us. He has called us together as His people and sent us forth to live in this land. Our lives will look different than those of the people around us. We will bless and not curse. We will be content with the calling into which God has

called us. We will rise and labor for the good of others and draw near to one another in the household of God. Such lifestyles will not indulge in all the pleasures that America has to offer; such people will not climb the corporate ladder, doing everything they can to get ahead. No, we will be content with what God gives us knowing that, in His kingdom, His presence is enough.

If you look at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son, you will notice that he has frozen the story just at the moment before the son receives all of the tangible gifts from his father. The son does not have a robe placed over his shoulders, he does not have his father's ring on his finger, he does not have good shoes on his feet. Instead, one foot is bare and worn from suffering in this world. But what the son does have is his father. In the presence of his father, he is led to trust that he shall not want anything else.

So, too, our Lord has called us to live as His people in faith. When Jesus spoke to His disciples, He encouraged them to take up their cross and follow Him. Life in this world will not be easy. It will not be filled with the best that this world has to offer. But it will be filled with God's love. His heavenly Father's work will continue, after He rises and ascends into heaven, and we have the privilege of being called into God's mission. We are the children of God, at work in our Father's kingdom, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

Notice how Paul closes this section of the text. He writes, "*We are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him*" (Romans 8:16-17). Paul calls to mind the suffering of Christ. We follow His way in this world, suffering with Christ, knowing that ultimately we will be joined to Him in glory at the revelation of God's kingdom. We are heirs with Christ. Children of God.

I mentioned earlier that 32 years had passed between the first and last times Rembrandt worked with the prodigal son. Much happened in Rembrandt's life during those 32 years. He lost his wife, his wealth, three of his four children, and his reputation. He then lost his last and only surviving son. "*In the world, you will have tribulation,*" our Lord says, "*but take heart; I have overcome the world*" (John 16:33). After losing all that our world would say gives life meaning, Rembrandt chose to focus upon the one thing that Jesus gives that this world cannot take away. The Spirit of adoption.

God, the Father, claims you as His child. Jesus makes us children of His heavenly Father. We bring our slavery to sin before God and in Jesus we are forgiven. Our fears are silenced and our future is secure. We are made children of God. Children and heirs. Heirs of a new world and a new kingdom to be revealed when Jesus returns, but more importantly, heirs of God himself. The apostle Paul paints the picture for you this morning in his letter to the Romans: God the Father claims all of you as His children. He loves you, forgives you, embraces you, and claims you as His people, because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus His Son. Amen.