

# A SPIRIT OF ADOPTION

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**ROMANS 8:14-17**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

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**MAY 19, 2013/PENTECOST SUNDAY**

I want to begin with what is perhaps a bit of an unusual starting point for a Pentecost sermon.

I want us to think about this question: *What does it mean to you to be “at home?”*

What images come to mind? A place? A house and a yard? A town? A province or a state? A country?

Or do you think of people when you think of home? Do you think of parents? Friends? A school? A church? A team?

I encountered this theme of home in my reading this week in a variety of ways.

Over the last few weeks, I have been reading a lot of the work of Brennan Manning. Manning was a Roman Catholic priest, mystic, writer, recovering alcoholic, and evangelist, among other things.

In his autobiography, *All is Grace*, Manning describes a loveless childhood. He was born to severe Irish Roman Catholic parents who in countless ways communicated to him that he was unwanted and unappreciated. He was an “accident.” He knew little of parental affection or affirmation. He was berated, abused, mocked, dismissed, and ignored.

Manning grew up with a profound sense of alienation. He didn’t feel like he belonged.

One of the revelations of faith in Jesus Christ—one that he never tired of speaking and writing about—was the grace that says, “you are accepted and loved, no matter who you are and what you have done.” You *belong*.

On a very different level, I was reading an article at *Christianity Today* that discussed the problem of the disappearance of the “Millennial” generation (those born in the 1980’s) from the church. Many people assume this demographic has abandoned faith, but

current research is showing this isn't exactly the case. Many have faith, but it is often somewhat vague and undefined, and has no connection to a real community.

According to the article "most millennials are actually 'nomads....' [T]hey're spiritually homeless but not actually the faithless people they're portrayed to be.

I think this describes many people in the twenty-first century, not just twenty and thirty-somethings. We live in a transient culture where we are always moving on to the next thing, the next job, the next relationship, the next place, the next purchase, the next... whatever.

We are often restless and unsettled.

The final one was an article from the *New York Times* that discussed a rise of nearly 30 percent in suicide rates for Americans 35 to 54 between 1999 and 2010. A number of causes were identified, but chief among them was lack of community, "chronic loneliness" and "weakened social ties."

I think that each of these, in different ways, points to the same basic feature about us as human beings: We are looking for home.

Home can be a geographical place that we have a special connection to.

But on a deeper level, I think, home involves a sense of *belonging*. This is what we are looking for. We are looking for acceptance, for welcome, for embrace. We are looking for a sense of *fit* between our experience and who we feel we were made to be.

We are looking for home.

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As we have already heard, today is Pentecost Sunday. The birthday of the church.

The day the church celebrates the descent of the Holy Spirit.

I heard an interesting comment this week from someone in our church who had been talking to a friend about Pentecost (I think?).

*I thought Mennonites didn't believe in the Holy Spirit.*

It's an understandable statement. While all Mennonite confessions of faith gladly affirm the Trinity, the existence of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit's work in conforming us to the image of Christ, we don't tend to talk much about the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps Mennonites are of or have been a bit leery of the excess that is typically associated with more charismatic expressions of Christianity and a perceived overemphasis on the Holy Spirit.

We are Jesus people, after all. The Spirit is important, certainly, but for making us more like Jesus not for outlandish displays of super-spirituality.

In our first text this morning we heard about some pretty radical manifestations of the Spirit's activity. Tongues of fire, a violent rushing wind, strange gifts of language and interpretation...

We heard Peter quoting from the prophet Joel about the ordinary men and women having dreams and prophecies and the sun turning to darkness, the moon turning red on the great and glorious day of the Lord!

It's pretty wild stuff, but Mennonites have typically spent more time focusing on the role the Holy Spirit plays in discipleship than on the supernatural nature of the Spirit's manifestations.

We've heard the story of Pentecost this morning, from Acts 2.

I want to focus more on our second text from Romans. I want to focus less on *what happened* on that first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit descended upon the twelve apostles in Jerusalem, than on what it *meant*.

To do so, we're going to fast-forward a few decades later. The context is Paul's letter to the Romans.

In chapter eight, Paul talks a lot about life through the Spirit. Paul spends considerable time contrasting a couple of things

- life in the flesh vs. life in the spirit
- law vs. grace
- slavery vs. freedom
- fear vs. adoption

He is painting a picture of the new reality that Pentecost has made possible *and* of the human tendency to resist what is new in favour of the old, the predictable, the familiar.

Paul draws on some familiar biblical themes here.

His exhortation in 8:13—"if you live according to the sinful nature you will die; but if you live by the Spirit you will live"—hearkens back to Deuteronomy 30:19-20:

19 This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20 and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Paul is linking this new reality of life in the Spirit with familiar themes found throughout God's story.

Choose life.

Don't return to slavery.

Of course we know that the people of Israel frequently chose poorly. We know that despite the mighty deeds of power they witnessed, despite being liberated from slavery and oppression in Egypt, despite having a pillar of fire to guide them in the wilderness... They frequently wanted to go back.

Especially when things got hard. Or unpredictable. Or uncertain.

In Numbers 21 (to cite just one of many examples), we read:

4 The rabble among them had a strong craving; and the Israelites also wept again, and said, "If only we had meat to eat! 5 We remember the fish we used to eat in Egypt for nothing, the cucumbers, the melons, the leeks, the onions, and the garlic; 6 but now our strength is dried up, and there is nothing at all but this manna to look at."

Despite the new reality that they were being led into, despite the character of the God who was leading the, despite the promises made to them as a people, the Israelites were so often governed by fear.

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On of the pillars of our text from Romans today is Paul's claim that we have received a Spirit of Adoption.

What does this mean?

In context, this is quite clearly meant to describe a reality of freedom and belonging rather than slavery and fear.

We are all God's adopted kids because of Pentecost.

Our belonging in God's family does not depend on our ethnicity, our denominational background, our family background, our ability to keep the right rules, how much money we give to the work of the church, or anything like that.

Rather, the radical good news of Pentecost is that God's family is being blown wide open.

Where for the people of Israel, Pentecost (or Shavuot) was a feast dedicated to the celebration of *giving* of the Law on Sinai, for Christians, Pentecost is the celebration of the descent of the Holy Spirit and freedom *from* the law.

In the former, it was about defining borders. The Law was about maintaining the people of God.

In the latter, it was about expanding borders. The Spirit blows where the Spirit blows—all kinds of people, insiders, outsiders, Israelites and non-Israelites, speakers of all kinds of languages are not constituted as the new people of God.

In a profound sense, Pentecost is an undoing of all the identity markers of belonging that had come to define the people of Israel. Pentecost was God saying, "I cannot be contained in religious structures and institutions and rituals. I have much bigger and better things to accomplish, to invite the world into, than this!"

This was a scandalous message at the time. Indeed, when we read the rest of Acts we see that Peter and John get in quite a lot of trouble from both Jews and Gentiles for preaching this message.

It is *still* a scandalous message. We like the idea of freedom in theory, but we're not as good at in practice.

Just like Israel frequently wanted to go back to the slavery of Egypt, so those set free from the law by life in the Spirit are sometimes tempted to return to the slavery of the law.

Does this describe us, as well?

Even though we have been set free from the law by the Spirit, how often has the church resorted to new forms of legalism, of defining insider and outsider, clean and unclean, righteous and sinner?

How often have we taken this marvelous good news about freedom in Christ and turned it into grim duty or moral compulsion?

I think many of us can think of countless stories from our own experience about how we have seen the gospel of freedom and peace and belonging and hope turned into a rather blunt instrument to enforce conformity or a rigid code to define boundaries.

We don't do freedom very well, as human beings. We seem to either eagerly draw up new boundaries for determining who's in and who's out, OR we take freedom to be absolute licentiousness—anything goes!—and become slaves to our own impulses and desires.

But with God, freedom *from* is always also freedom *for*.

We are set free from the fear the came with slavery to a law we could never fulfill; but we are also set free *for* the lives we were made to live—lives of joy, peace, and self-sacrifice in joyful emulation of Christ.

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I often like to close with some version of the following questions.

1. What does this text tell us about who God is?
2. What do this texts tell us about who we are?
3. Where does this text lead us? What future does it invite us into? What action does it call us to take?

### **First, who is God?**

God is a promise keeper. Way back in Genesis 12, God chose the people of Israel to bless and to make a blessing to the nations. God's family was always intended to be a large and a diverse one. God is the God of all people, not a tribal God who only loves some people and not others.

Also, God is our adoptive Father. And he loves us.

### **Second, what does this text tell us about who we are?**

Quite simply, we are God's children.

This perhaps sounds trivial and obvious, but it's not. We are not servants of a cruel master or insignificant cogs in the divine machinery of a rather impersonal universe. We are not accidents or mistakes.

*We are members of a family*—a big family with all kinds of children, all united and enlivened by the same Spirit, all looking ahead to a future of peace and justice, truth and love—**glory**, as Paul says in 8:17.

Which is, perhaps, a different way of saying, ***we have a home. We belong.*** Our identity is safe and secure with our Creator, our Redeemer, and our Sustainer.

We are not orphans, as Jesus says in John 14:18 when he promises the coming of the Holy Spirit.

We are not “lost in the cosmos,” to quote the famous title Walker Percy’s book exploring our identity crisis in the modern era.<sup>1</sup>

We were made for God, made for each other, and made for this earth. We were made to participate with God in the making of all things new.

### **Third, what does this text invite us to be and to do?**

Choose life. Choose the Spirit over the law. Refuse to return to the slavery and death that seek to pull us back.

Live as free children who are dearly loved and adopted into God’s family, and share this good news with others.

We are to celebrate our identity as God’s adopted kids in a big, diverse family, and invite others in too!

*The good news of Pentecost is that the God of creation, the God who led the people of Israel through the desert, the God who made himself most fully known in the person of Jesus Christ—**this God** is our heart’s one true home.*

The message of Pentecost is not that God can put on a pretty impressive display of spiritual pyrotechnics and cause ordinary human beings to do miraculous things. That’s *part* of the story, but it is by no means the largest or most important part of the story (even if this is sometimes how we think about Pentecost).

The most important part of the story is that the Holy Spirit has brought about a completely new reality where our belonging in “the people of God” is based not on proper adherence to the Law or correct ethnicity or ritual purity or anything like that, but on our willing identification and participation in the very Spirit and mission of God.

May God help us to be people of freedom and trust, not slavery and fear.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux), 1983.

