

Second Sunday of Christmas January 3 2021

Ephesians 1:3-14; Gospel: John 1:[1-9] 10-18

Probably 10 years ago, when I was serving at First Lutheran in Cedar Rapids, I poked my head into the weekly text study for area Pastor's. I was not ordained at the time and didn't preach on a regular basis, but I did want to say hello to my colleagues.

They were talking about the phrase, child of God, and how it was used by us and in scripture. Intrigued, I entered into what became an ongoing conversation with Pastor (now retired) Paul Finger, a unique voice I miss at our text studies now.

Paul's basic stance was that all people are children of God and therefore are part of God's family. However, not all people enjoy the full benefits of being God's children, which are first celebrated in Baptism.

I wondered about that. If you look at the rite for baptism we use that language once, at the anointing of the child who has just been baptized in the name of the Triune God. "Ann, child of God, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever." That language is used, after the baptism.

So, leaving my colleagues to their discussion, I returned to my office and began to search scripture. Caught now by this question, how does the bible use that phrase? How did our ancestors in the faith understand it?

Interestingly enough, there are no instances of “Child of God” I could find in scripture, but quite a few “children of God”. These are mostly to be found in the letter of Paul to the Romans.

When you look at the passages in both the Hebrew Bible (often labeled the Old Testament) and the New Testament you find that aside from a couple of instances that are ambiguous most of the texts seem to indicate that it is those who believe in Christ, have faith, are currently in the church who are called “the children of God.” This text in John 1:12 along with Galatians 3:26, and Romans 8:14 most strongly support this kind of argument. That before Christ and faith in Christ we were not/ were not able to be children of God. If you tie the certainty of that gift of faith to baptism, then certainly you could say prior to baptism, one would not be referred to as Children of God.

Ultimately, Paul and I, left it at this, we agreed in principle that there is something different in our relationship with God after the gift of faith. Whether this is given to us through baptism, after the Spirit moves in us, or in the relationship the Jews have with God (the language in the Hebrew Bible that speaks about “children of God” clearly refers to the chosen people of Israel who are already in relationship with God through the visible sign of the covenant on the men through circumcision and their worship of God through sacrifice and following the rules God has laid out for them in the Law.)

I suppose I would still reserve the term “child of God” or “children of God” for those who are in that faith relationship with God as that seems to be the context for most of the texts in scripture.

How I tend to talk about it is that we are all created in the image of God, but that it is believers who are called “Children of God”. God is in relationship/related to both as creator and to the faithful as Abba, Father. I wonder if that is the difference, is the aspect of the relationship.

Now, one might wonder, what is the point of all this. Isn't it just words, semantics, the same difference as potato, poh- tah-toe, tomato, toe-mah-toe?

I don't think so. From the beginning, people have recognized that their encounter with Jesus changes them and their relationship with God. Even believers who were Jews recognized this.

Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians talks about how God has destined us (believers) for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ (baptism/faith) through grace freely bestowed on us in Jesus. Note the language- it is in, through, because of Jesus that these things are possible for us. So, it is only in the encounter with Jesus that this changed relationship can happen.

So, what was the point of this whole exchange with my friend Paul?

God does care for, love, all those who are created in God's image, all human beings. Could you label that care as the same as a parent has for their child? Sure.

But from the beginning, there has been an acknowledgment that the relationship of God to those who believe is- different. And that difference is a two-way street. As with the Jews, this covenant relationship is one which has both responsibilities and privileges.

We will talk more about baptism next week, particularly our Lutheran take on it, as we celebrate the baptism of our Lord Jesus.

But this week, and the Gospel of John in particular, sets up the point.

Jesus, the light of the world, has given to all who receive him, who believe in his name, the power to become Children of God. And these children are not born by blood, or our will but by God's will. God's desire. Paul echoes this when he says we were "destined for adoption" through Jesus Christ, God's own Son.

It is God's will, God's desire that we should all become God's children. That we should all have this encounter with Jesus that changes everything.

If you have not been baptized, but wish to receive this grace upon grace, to have that grace of God literally poured down on you, contact me- I would be more than happy to talk with you about it.

As God's children we are have received a great gift, a great privilege has been given to us. Undeserved and unearned. So that...

Did you catch those words in Paul's letter? So that. We have been adopted, received these things, so that. For a purpose. "To live for the praise of his glory." To live to praise the glory of God in everything that we say and do. Or, as our baptismal and confirmation promises put it, "To proclaim the good news of God in Jesus Christ through word and deed."

We have been given the great gift of becoming God's children and with that comes great responsibility. For just as I go forth and every action and word I speak reflects on my father and mother and the whole Middleswarth clan, so

those of us who have been adopted by God through Jesus Christ reflect on our heavenly Father as we go forth and speak and act. Particularly as we do so in the name of Jesus as we bear the name Christ-ian into the world.

Do our lives reflect the love of God as shown to us in Jesus Christ? Love that is freely and undeservedly given and bestowed. Love that is infinitely patient, that sees the perfection within the imperfection of others. Love that is self-sacrificial, even in the face of ingratitude, incomprehension, or active resistance.

Do we reflect, in some small way, the light of Christ into the darkness of other people's lives? Offering a kind word, a helping hand, a comforting shoulder. Working to provide the daily bread of food, shelter, clothing, comfort. Speaking words that lift up, not tear down. Sitting with people in their darkest times so that they might know they are not alone.

This wonderful Christmas gift we have been given, Jesus- being given the power to become children of God, is not some precious trinket that we place on the shelf and look at every once in a while. Rather, this gift is to be used. Like that oh so special shirt or outfit we so wanted, worn every day whether it seems appropriate or not.

Siblings in Christ, we have come out of a difficult year and enter into a new one that holds challenges we can see and ones that we can't.

But let us go with this reminder on our lips daily, "I am God's child, deserving of love and respect, and God will use me to change the world."

Jesus Christ, light of the world, Word of God made flesh, visible sign of God's love for you came into this world so that you might become... that you might live a life fuller and more abundant.

Child of God, deserving of love and respect, in the year 2021 God will use you to change the world- one small act of love, of patience, of kindness at a time.

Thanks be to God!