

## THE FIRST SUNDAY OF CHRISTMAS | DECEMBER 31, 2023

ISAIAH 61:10-62:3 | PSALM 148 | GALATIANS 4:4-7 | LUKE 2:22-40

Back in the 1990s, the Olive Garden had this great slogan. “When You’re Here, You’re Family.” It is, I would argue, the perfect slogan. It’s inviting. It’s warm. It sounds like something that Robert DeNiro would say in “Meet the Parents.”

For some reason, they decided to change it. They changed it to “We’re All Family Here.” It sounds kind of similar. It has most of the same words. But it’s not the same. It comes off a little bit brusque, maybe even a little bit ominous. It sounds like something that Robert DeNiro would say in “The Godfather.”

The point here is that “family” images often cut in two different ways. On the one hand, family can be used as a way to express a kind of warmth and kindness. If we know someone well, we’ll say that we’re “familiar.” We’re like family. The word “kind” comes from the same root as “kin.” People that we relate to.

On the other hand, the family image can often be exclusionary, too. All the traditions, the unspoken norms, the inside jokes that make family feel close can also make it feel difficult to break into. Family reunions can be a lot of fun. They’re not as much fun if it’s someone else’s family.

This matters because we use that family image in church a lot. People often talk about our “church family” when talking about church communities. One of the congregations in our synod even announces on its website that it considers itself to be a “literal family.” One imagines they’re using “literally” in the non-literal sense.

That family image also gets picked up in scripture, too. We actually heard an interesting example of it in today’s reading from Galatians where St. Paul describes the gifts of salvation—the gifts of Christmas, we could say—as an inheritance.

When we think about inheritance, a passing on of something to the next generation, we might think of something like the TV shows like “Succession” or “Yellowstone,” where people plot and plan to get the best of the inheritance. People are always scheming over how to get lined up in the right place.

But in Paul’s world, it is a foregone conclusion where the inheritance goes. It is passed on to the next generation in the family. And there were some slightly different ways you could pass on land or wealth, but it wasn’t something that you could get super creative with. When Jacob plots get Esau’s inheritance, he doesn’t convince his father that he’ll be a better steward of it. He has to pretend to be his brother. Because there’s a custom, a norm, a tradition for who receives what. It’s not up for debate.

The upside of that image, the reason why Paul likes it, is that it gives you a way to talk about grace. The whole idea of “deserving” your inheritance doesn’t make any sense. It is yours not because of your behavior or your skills or your contributions. It is yours simply because of your relationship with this other person.

And that’s why St. Paul likes this image as a way to talk about God’s action in Jesus. That just as a father in the Old Testament might give land to his son, the capital-F Father gives the capital-S Son the gifts of love. And the Son now passes that love onto his heirs. Not because of what they do, but simply because of their relationship.

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But remember that these family images cut both ways. The inheritance image gives you a way to think about grace because it's all about relationship. But there's a problem with it, too. Which is *What if you don't have the right kind of relationship?* Well, in theory, according to the rules of inheritance, you're out of luck. To use the old Olive Garden slogan, *We're all family here. So who are you?*

But notice the move Paul makes in today's reading. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman... so that we might receive adoption as children." Inheritance, which is about honoring existing relationships, gets paired off against adoption, which is all about creating *new* relationships. The message is *You're included. You're part of the family, too.*

The inheritance we receive because of this adoption changes a lot of things. But let me give you just one in particular. This is the one that Paul alludes to at the end of today's reading. Imagine that you're at a meeting or conference. You're with a bunch of people. You don't really know them. If you're someone with any kind of social awareness, you're probably going to start with the most formal way of addressing people. Dr. [Last name]. Principal [Last name]. When I meet new clergy in our synod, I always address them as Pastor [Last Name]. If you start by addressing people with just first name or some nickname that you came up with or—God forbid—"Hey, you," the other person is probably going to say, *We don't have that kind of relationship.* There are names that our family and friends use for us that people we just met don't get to use. This is just basic etiquette.

But look at how St. Paul ends this reading. He says, "Because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!'" Look at how God is addressed here. As Abba. This is something like "Dad" or "Pops." The point is, Abba is a term that implies a sense of intimacy, warmth, and history. It's the type of word that you only get to use if you have a relationship with someone.

Jesus has that kind of relationship with God the Father. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, Jesus gives us that kind of relationship to us. And says, *You can pray to God the way I pray to God. You can address God the way I address God.*

This is what we do whenever we say the Lord's Prayer together. The Lord's Prayer, Jesus's prayer, is not just the prayer that Jesus tells us to pray. It's the prayer that he prays. And when we use his prayer, we don't address God as just "God." Or "Jesus's Abba." But "Our Abba" or "Our Father."

This relationship is our inheritance. Not something we created for ourselves. Not something we achieved our way into. But something that Jesus creates for and entrusts to us. And filled with his Spirit, we are empowered not only to pray the way Jesus prays. But to live the way he lives.

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