

## THE EIGHTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | JULY 23, 2023

ISAIAH 44:6-8 | PSALM 86:11-17 | ROMANS 8:12-25 | MATTHEW 13:24-30, 36-43

Maybe you've had that experience recently where you tell someone a story or something you think is interesting. And after you finish, they give you a funny little look, maybe they turn their head to the side, and they say, "So..." What they're looking for is a takeaway. What they're supposed to be paying attention to. Whether this story has any effect on their life.

For the past few weeks, we've been hearing from St. Paul's letter to the Romans. And he's been pretty deep in the theological weeds. Some of us might be starting to wonder *So...* But today he emerges from the dense thicket and says it for us. "So then, brothers and sisters..." That should be our clue that he's about to tell us something important. Paul is going to explain how the gift of the Holy Spirit, the power of the risen Christ, changes how we live.

In the passage we heard today, he explains it using a bunch of different images. It's like having your debt forgiven. It's like being freed from slavery. It's like giving birth. It's like fruit. It's like new sight. If St. Paul had an editor, she probably would have said, "Let's just pick one."

So today, we're going to focus on just one of the images he chooses to explain life in the Spirit, which is adoption. "You have received a spirit of adoption," he tells us. "When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God."

This adoption image is unusual in the New Testament. It's only used about half a dozen times, and most of them come the book of Romans. But it's an image that's loaded up with all kinds of meaning. The most obvious meaning is that God is creating something new. Instead of just working with what we've inherited, God is creating a new household, a new family, a new social structure, a new way of relating to one another. Even people who are not physically related to one another will become kindred spirits in the body of Christ.

But there's a more subtle meaning, too. One that helps us understand everything else Paul has talked about in Romans so far. Adoption acknowledges a distinction between what is objectively true and what our subjective experience is. And for our purposes, objective just means something that exists independently of our experience, and subjective just means something that involves our own perspective.

If you've ever watched the show *Finding Your Roots* with Dr. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., you've probably seen an example of this distinction. When they go research people's ancestry, they periodically discover that there was an adoption in the family that the guest didn't know about. So sometime in the past, there was this grafting together of two families. This has always been the case, even if the person didn't know about it. It's objectively true. And when Dr. Gates tells the guest about this discovery, they often say something in surprise or shock. But then they get quiet. And you can see them thinking *How does this change my sense of who I am?* They're trying to make the objective truth part of their subjective experience. It's always been true, but now it's true *for them*.

And that distinction between the objective and the subjective helps us understand what it means to live in the Spirit.<sup>1</sup> What's the objective piece? It's grace. It's what we've been hearing in Romans all summer. Jesus, Paul tells us, was raised from death by God the Father through the

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<sup>1</sup> George Hunsinger, "Karl Barth and Paul Tillich," *Theology Today*, 2018, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0040573618785338>.

power of the Spirit. And because of Jesus's resurrection, we have been freed from sin and death and fear and anything else that threatens to pull us away from love of God and love of neighbor. As Paul so often reminds us, Christ lived, died, and was raised for all. So we have all been adopted by God, joined in this new creation.

This doesn't depend on whether we signed up or whether we think it's a good idea or whether we think we're deserving of it. It depends on God. And in Christ's ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, God has spoken definitively about us. We, Paul tells us, have been adopted by God and made joint heirs with Christ.

Paul Tillich once described that message of adoption this way. "You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you... Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. Simply accept the fact that you are accepted!"<sup>2</sup>

Notice what's left off of that line. It's not *You're accepted if you feel like you're accepted*. Not *You're accepted if you do ten good deeds this week*. Not *You're accepted if you're baptized*. You're accepted. Period. End of story.

This acceptance, this adoption, is true regardless of whether we believe it or not. But for it to be helpful to us and useful to our neighbors, we have to trust it. To use Tillich's phrase, we have to "accept that we are accepted." The word that we use for that subjective experience of trust is faith. And that's hard. Sometimes our trust in God is robust, sometimes it's anemic, most days it's somewhere in between. If we're left to our own devices, we're probably not going to trust that we're actually loved, accepted, and renewed by God. We're probably going to get distracted or discouraged or disinterested or devolve into our old habits.

And that's exactly why God gives us the gift of the Holy Spirit. To create faith in us. So that we can trust God's promises faithfully and serve God's people lovingly. Faith is not about believing the right doctrine or thinking the right thing. It just means trust that what God says about us in the resurrection of Jesus is actually true. It's always been true. But thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, it becomes true *for us*.

As Paul reminds us, "It is [the Holy Spirit] bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Whenever we gather around font, word, and table, the Holy Spirit creates faith in us. Not by encouraging us to be a better version of ourselves. But by reminding us who we actually are. And empowering us to become who we already are in Christ's resurrection.

We, Paul tells us, have been given a spirit of adoption. A spirit to be shared with all of God's creation. A spirit that proclaims with joy and thanksgiving, "You are loved. You are valued. You are accepted." A spirit that takes what is already true and makes it true *for our neighbor*.

So... Well, as you can see, so quite a bit. So grace. So faith. So life together in the Spirit.

Joseph Schattauer Paillé, Pastor

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<sup>2</sup> I think this is from Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 2008).