

Jesus Saves: Adopted!

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Texts: John 1:11–13, Ephesians 1:1–6, Galatians 4:4–7, Romans 8:14–17

How does Jesus save us? How does Jesus bridge the gap between us and God? In this sermon series we've been looking at different scriptural metaphors describing Jesus' saving work. Today we are looking at the theme of adoption. I think that being adopted into God's family is a rich and fruitful metaphor.

A few weeks ago I preached about the ransom theory of salvation, and I started by saying that no one I knew had ever been ransomed. In contrast to that, today's theme of adoption is one that many of us have personal experience with. I'm married to someone who was adopted, and so are quite a few people in my extended family. I think that's true of quite a few of you here today. So there are dozens of adoption anecdotes that could be shared, all of which colour our understanding of these scripture passages that talk about adoption. I want to share a few stories today with you. We know about adoption. But almost two thousand years have passed since the writers of these scriptures lived. When we talk about adoption, are we talking about the same thing that they were?

In our society's understanding of adoption, when you adopt a child or young person, you become their parents in an entirely comprehensive way. You take someone into your family to love them as your own child. The biological parents' legal rights over the child are extinguished, and you become the legal parents of the child. You have decision-making power for them when they are a minor, and they have inheritance rights for your estate when you die. Of course we have different types of adoption. There is open adoption where the biological parents have visiting rights or even some consultative role in the raising of the child. But adoption always involves taking over legal responsibility for a child and incorporating them into your family in an official way.

In our society, we differentiate between adoption and being a guardian. When you are a guardian, you take care of them, but you are not their official parents. I knew someone whose parents died when she was a young teenager: an aunt and uncle took over caring for her. This person was never adopted by the new family; they did not want to be seen as replacing the deceased parents. She was not expected to take the surname of the guardian family. She was lovingly included into a new family, but her family name was still from her deceased parents, and she was going to inherit her parents' estate when she reached the age of majority.

Maybe this is all self-evident to you, I'm not telling you anything new. As people in this culture and time, when we speak about adoption and when we speak about being a guardian, we generally understand what we mean.

So let's turn to the Bible. What did they mean when they talked about adoption? Surprisingly, what I found when I studied this is that by and large the Jewish tradition in the Old Testament did not have an understanding of adoption. The word is rarely used in the Old Testament, and there are no Jewish laws governing adoption because it did not happen. Obviously there were orphans and they needed to be cared for. But taking care of orphaned children was always understood as guardianship. The orphans never lost their primary identity as children of the deceased parent.

Biological bloodlines were the most important thing in Judaism. And in fact, if a man died without children, his brother was commanded to take his widow as a wife, and procreate children who would be considered heirs of the deceased man, and not of the biological father. It was sort of the opposite of what we consider to be adoption: you biologically fathered children that were never considered your own!

In Judaism, the rights of biological parents to be considered parents could never be extinguished. Think of the story of Sarah and Hagar. Hagar was Sarah's slave, and Sarah had the idea that by Abram fathering a child with her slave, it would be her child. But in the story, Hagar is always called the mother of the child. Didn't you ever wonder, "Why didn't Sarah just adopt Ishmael?" She never formally adopts Ishmael because there was no such thing as adoption.

Moses was famously picked up out of the water by an Egyptian, a daughter of the Pharaoh. She "took him as her son". But the princess was Egyptian, and had a different understanding of adoption than the Hebrew people did. Even in this case, Moses is not considered to be legally an Egyptian; he is always considered to be Hebrew. When he goes back to Egypt many years later, he is not considered a long-lost Egyptian. He has no legal status in the Egyptian state, he is a Hebrew leading the Hebrews.

The only other person in the Old Testament who is referred to as adopted is Esther, who was taken into the family of her cousin Mordecai because her parents died. But she was taken in "as a daughter". It's significant that the story tells us that Mordecai was not her biological father.

The Jewish understanding of adoption then, was that basically there wasn't such a thing as adoption. The parents were always legally considered the parents, although orphan children were given shelter, in what we would call a guardian relationship.

So if adoption wasn't a Jewish concept, then what about all these verses that we read? What are all these references to adoption doing in the New Testament? They are there because New Testament thought was influenced by the Roman world. Paul was a Roman citizen, and he wrote some of our verses. Some of our verses today were in fact directly written for people in Rome...they understood what adoption meant.

In the Roman world there were very developed laws and practices about adoption. In Roman culture, the most important thing was **not** the continuation of a bloodline, but rather the continuation of a family name. So under Roman law, a man with no sons would adopt someone to take his name. They usually adopted adults, so they would know whether they were worthy young people to take the name. This adopted son would legally leave behind his previous family, take a new name, and become the heir of his adopted father. The son's past history was legally null and void, any debts he had in his previous life were cancelled. He was a new person with a new name, and new responsibilities. Through adoption, family names were preserved, and family fortunes stayed with the family name. This was a very common practice especially among the nobility. To illustrate how little stigma was attached to adoption, several Roman emperors were adopted sons. Once you were adopted you were considered a son in every sense of the word.

I should also mention that we have a different understanding today of property than the Romans did. Today parents own property, and when they die, their heirs will own it. Heirs receive their property on the death of the parents. But in Roman law, the heirs were considered to be owners of the family property too. They were co-owners with the head of the family, they were part of the family enterprise.

So that is some background on adoption in Judaism and the Roman world, and I think it sheds some light on this metaphor for salvation. Up until the time of Jesus, there was a real emphasis on the Jews being the chosen people; they had bloodlines that could be traced back to Jacob and Abraham. Jesus challenged that. Remember Jesus saying, "God can from these stones raise up children for Abraham..." (Matthew 3:9) He is saying that bloodlines are not important. Now listen to the phrases we read about adoption, with this context in mind: "God chose us, God destined us for adoption, as his children, through Jesus Christ." (Ephesians 1:5) You were aliens and strangers, without hope in the world. You who once were far off, have now been brought near. God has made us into one, and broken down the walls. "So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God...." (Ephesians 2:19)

It helps to understand the context. But even as we listen to these words, trying to understand them in their context, I still find I listen to them thinking about the adoption stories I know. These verses hit me on a gut level and not just a head level.

The story that is uppermost on my mind is about a baby boy adopted by a friend of mine. I'll call the little boy Caleb; he was dropped off at an orphanage in Ethiopia when he was just a few weeks old. There are 4.5 million orphans in Ethiopia, largely because of the AIDS epidemic. That means 5% of the population is orphaned. Of course many of these orphans are taken into the homes of family members, but there are many that end up living in orphanages.

My friend was looking to adopt a boy to join her family and be a little brother to her son. She went through the arduous foreign adoption process. It took a long time and cost a lot of money. Eventually she was approved, and she was matched with three month old Caleb. Being matched meant that she saw his picture for the first time, and it was love at first sight. But that was the beginning of the seven month adoption wait. Throughout that time they received regular pictures and updates about Caleb's health. Caleb's new mom and dad were anxious to meet their baby. Then came the day when the paperwork was almost done; they travelled to Ethiopia. Instead of looking at pictures, they could hold their son for the first time.

I took care of Caleb's older brother while his parents went to pick up Caleb in Ethiopia. They phoned us to tell us about their first meeting. She said, "You should hear him laugh, he has such a wonderful laugh." And just then in the background I heard him laugh, a terrific infectious giggly laugh, and the parents on the phone started laughing. Everyone was laughing together, pure joy!

I took the big brother to the airport to meet his little brother. As soon as his mom and dad came walking through the security doors with his little brother in a baby carrier, he broke free from me and ran to them. I will never forget the tight knot of family as they embraced for the first time, a family of four. Together at last.

Caleb faced some big challenges. Because they were a family now, they faced big challenges together. At ten months old, he didn't know how to crawl yet...in the orphanage he had been given food and shelter, but he spent most of his life in a crib. He had never been able to explore the world. He was totally freaked out by the feel of the ground, by the touch of grass on his skin. He had never felt that before. He had only ever been fed one type of pablum, he hadn't had to chew anything. And he didn't know how to cry. Crying didn't make a difference in the orphanage, there were too many kids for the nurses to pick a child up when they cried. Caleb had received the basic necessities of life, he was given food and was kept clean and washed, and the staff had done what they could, but they had a lot of children to care for.

I contrast Caleb's life in the orphanage with his life with his new family. He had daily, hourly love, cuddles, personal contact, medical attention, being the centre of attention in his family...that boy was loved! If you ask my friend about the adoption, it is very hard for her to talk about it without getting choked up; Caleb has been the best gift they have ever received. They can't imagine life without him. They are a gift in Caleb's life too. Together they are a family. Something amazing in the human experience has happened. Love is extended, love is multiplied, a family grows! If you've been close to an adoption story, you know that it is holy ground.

When we try to think about our relationship with God, it's hard to describe, because God is beyond our understanding. We go from what we know. And we know these deep personal experiences of the best of human love and commitment, like the story of adoption I just told you about. We look at our best experiences and think, "That must be something like what God is like." The best of what we have, only better.

It's not surprising that New Testament writers, when trying to describe the relationship between human beings and God, grab onto a metaphor like adoption. Listen to these phrases with the story I just told you in mind. "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son...in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, 'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God." (Galatians 4:4-7) Jesus called God "Abba", an endearing term meaning Daddy or Papa. No longer strangers, or aliens, we too are able to call God Abba. It's good news. We are part of the family, heirs of God's grace.

Early church theologians such as Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius all wrote about how God adopts us as children of God. This emphasis on being accepted into the household of God was continued in the Eastern Church tradition, but it's not something that many theologians in the Western part of the church discussed. There isn't the adoption atonement theory, like we hear about the ransom theory, or the substitutionary theory. Adoption was always only a metaphor, and one that was not talked about very often by theologians, except in one tradition.

That is up until the time of John Calvin, a theologian and church leader who began the Reform movement in the 1500s. He was very drawn to the idea of adoption, that God adopts us. He was struck by the idea that God chooses us. The scriptures that we read today about adoption became part of the foundation of Calvin's doctrines of predestination. In a world where God adopts, theologians divided the world into chosen and non-chosen people. There are the children of God inside the church, part of God's family, and there are the unchosen ones. Some children are predestined to become the children of God and some are predestined to alienation from God.

John Knox, a Reformed theologian in Scotland who founded the Presbyterian Church, wrote an article called "On Predestination in answer to the Cavillations by an Anabaptist in 1560". I had to look up the word "cavillations"! Cavils are petty objections. The petty objections that the Anabaptists had against predestination were likely to do with free will. Knox talks about how God adopts and chooses people. Anabaptists stressed that we have free will as to whether or not we want to join God's family.

As I read the history of a theology of adoption, it was troubling to me. When you take this metaphor and run with it, and apply it religiously, it can take you in directions that make me uncomfortable. So the metaphor of adoption can have some limitations. But I'm not totally ready to abandon the idea of adoption. I think adoption is a rich metaphor, particularly as we imagine church life.

Let me tell you another adoption story. Michael and Mary Jo Jackson are from Indiana; I've heard about them a couple of times in different news stories, because of their amazing family. Strong Roman Catholics, they felt called to be parents to a large family. They had seven children of their own; that's when they decided to adopt another child. They went to Russia and brought home a little son. But their experience seeing the kids in the orphanage opened their hearts to other children they had seen there, so they went back four months later and brought back another child. And another, and another. Over the years they have been called Momma and Daddy to 22 children from nine different countries. They adopted children that had specific physical or emotional challenges. Each child they parented was unique and loved. The Jacksons are a loving and inclusive family; the children's lives have been changed, but the lives of the parents have been immeasurably enriched as well.

An adoption story like that is a rich metaphor for understanding the church. So many people in our society feel like they don't belong. People feel alienated and alone. They feel divided from others. The idea that God loves us, wants us, seeks us out and includes us in the family of God is immensely appealing.

As God's church, we are part of a community that God has chosen, it's not a community of our own choosing. We find ourselves at the communion table with our brothers and sisters; can we live into that promise, can we love each other as our family as our heavenly parent intends?

Here's a final adoption story. I have another friend who has a sister who is adopted. It was a hard road; the adopted child (I'll call her Becky) had multiple emotional challenges. There was so much conflict, serious even violent conflict with Becky at the centre. And the family was sometimes a broken and very hurting place. My friend remembers at one point, going to her mother and pleading, "Can't we send Becky back...this is too hard." Her mother said, "How could we send her back...we love her, she is a part of our family. This is her home."

Adoption is a good metaphor for church. We get into some pretty big conflicts in the church. Sometimes we are like my friend, "Why does this person have to be part of my church? Can't we send them back where they came from?"

Or I think of the larger family of God. There are some parts of the Christian church that make us feel very uncomfortable. We would rather not identify with them, and they probably would rather not identify with us. We'd like to disown each other if we could, "You're not part of God's family!" But we are all adopted together into one family. Can we handle that?

This week, I encourage you to think some more about this theme of adoption. Can you believe that you are included in God's family, as a beloved member, who can call God Abba? How does belonging to God's family change your life? How does belonging to this family, this larger family, challenge you when you see or hear about Christians who make you uncomfortable?

I hope we can go from here singing the song that we sang together earlier this morning:

For we are strangers no more
but members of Christ's family,
strangers no more
but part of one community,
strangers no more,
we're neighbours to each other now.
Strangers no more,
we're sisters and we're brothers now.
[Kenneth Morse, Brethren Press, 1979]