

Message: “God’s Patient Children”

What’s the creepiest sound you ever heard?

“For Russell and Maria Moore, the creepiest sound was nothing at all. They were in the hallway of an overseas orphanage, on the first of two trips required by a petition to adopt. The orphanage staff led them down a hallway to meet the two one-year-old boys they hoped to adopt. What scared them wasn’t the conditions and stench.

What scared them was the quiet. The place was silent.

Russell asked Maria, ‘Why is it so quiet? The place is filled with babies.’ The stillness was a stark contrast to the noise of a nursery in the U.S. Listening carefully, they could hear the bumping of cribs, rustling noises and thumbs being sucked. That’s all. These children didn’t cry because infants eventually learn to stop crying if no one ever responds to their calls for food or comfort or love. No one ever responded to these children. So they stopped.

When Maria and Russell entered the boys’ room, it was the same.

Sergei (now Timothy) bounced up and down while Maxim (now Benjamin) stood. Neither boy made a sound. The couple read them books they couldn’t understand, but there were no squeals, cries or groans. Every day, when they left, it was the same as when they arrived: silence.

The couple dreaded the last day, when they had to leave and return to the U.S. to wait for the legal paperwork to be completed. After that, they could return to take the boys home for good. After hugging and kissing the boys, Maria and Russell walked into the hallway in tears.

That’s when they heard the scream. Little Maxim fell back in his crib and let out a yell. It seemed like he knew, maybe for the first time, he would be heard. At some level, he knew he had parents now. Russell says he will never forget how the hairs on his arms stood up when he heard the cry. The couple was struck by the force of the cry.”¹

This reminds me of the cry “Abba! Amma!” Paul wrote about. This is the lesson we take up today from Romans 8.

¹ Material drawn from “Abba Changes Everything” by Russell Moore, *Christianity Today*, 2010

Relationships reflect an eternal truth about God. Paul said, “*I bow my knees before [God], from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name*” (Ephesians 3:14-15, NRSV). We know what families and relationships can be like based on God’s behavior toward us. God loves us and wants our love in return. God listens to us, helps us and guides us throughout life. This loving care is often shared in our relationships with our parents and those in our household. Jesus tells us the way parents love us shows God’s active love toward us (Matthew 7:9-11; Hebrews 12:5-17).

The same principle is at work in adoption. Adoption is good news. Paul takes this a step further. He claims our identity as Christians is grounded in our adoption in Christ. And as Jesus’ family and co-heirs of God’s goodness, we are called to take up the life and mission of Christ. And so we join Christ as advocates for the poor, marginalized, abandoned and orphaned. Without an identity in Christ, care for others often seems like one more cause for compassionate people to follow ... until no one is looking. Without a relationship, adoption can become merely a metaphor, just another way to say “I’m saved” but not mean it.

The child’s scream changed everything, more than a judge's verdict or paperwork. It was the moment when the child recognized they would be heard. They went from being an orphan to being a child, having a place with those who truly cared for them. It was also the moment when the couple became parents, in fact if not in law. They recognized something was wrong, because suddenly, life as it had been seemed terribly disordered. This is true for us, too. We see disorder and cry out to God.

We often hear “Abba” or “Amma” with comfort and familiarity, the spiritual equivalent of an infant saying “Mama” or “Daddy.” Relational intimacy is surely present in the text, but it isn't sentimental. Jesus’ Spirit lets our hearts cry “*Abba, Amma.*” This is an echo of Jesus’ cry as he prays “*with loud cries and tears*” for deliverance in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:36).

This isn’t a cry of comfort. It’s the scream of those in pain, those who are suffering, those who are at the end of their rope and don’t know what to do. We can’t live or survive alone. We need God.

The Spirit of adoption calls us to recognize ourselves as spiritual orphans. The Spirit compels us to see our fallen universe - and our own egocentric part in it - as disordered; not the way it's supposed to be. We ought to recognize this more often than we do. We believe "*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*" (Romans 10:13). We want to respond with Isaiah, "*Here I am, Lord. Send me!*" (Isaiah 6:8). But we rarely feel how desperate and liberating our cry is. We may assume it's a cry only at the beginning of our Christian walk, not through the ongoing work of the Spirit. We can grow complacent, too comfortable to cry out for a Savior we can sense only by faith.

The "Abba, Amma" cry of our adoption defines who we are and what household we belong to. This is why the Spirit of adoption has everything to do with unity and shalom, and not the divisions humanity creates. None of us are natural-born children of God, entitled to all this grace, all this glory. And it's not just Gentiles who were adopted into this family. The Jewish Christians were adopted, too (Romans 9:4). The same is true for all races and people, no matter how others may label us. If we believe in God, we're adopted into the divine family. It's not an exclusive relationship. It's inclusive. All are welcome.

This is how the gridlock between our good intentions and bad deeds is resolved. God's Spirit lives us and sets us free from everything limiting and binding us. It changes us and invites us to accept our inheritance and live into it. This freedom can happen all of a sudden or over time, as we slowly begin to trust God more deeply and turn over those parts of ourselves we hold back.

The Spirit of adoption is revolutionary. Christians sometimes seem to identify more with branding and political parties than with each other. Our adoption in Christ shouldn't make us warring partisans but loving siblings, whom the Spirit has taken from the division of Babel to the oneness of Pentecost. When the church is in unity, we attest to the "*manifold wisdom of God*" (Ephesians 3:10).

How much more credible would our good news be if "church family" wasn't just a slogan, if "brothers and sisters" was more than metaphor? What would happen if the world saw fewer "white churches" and "ethnic churches," fewer "blue-collar churches" and

“white-collar churches,” fewer “baby boomer” and “emerging” churches, fewer traditional or contemporary churches, and fewer fundamental or progressive churches?

What would happen if the world saw more churches whose members have little in common except being saved by Jesus?

Our church can show families how love and belonging transcend our differences. And in turn, God uses blended families to teach the church. Perhaps the reason some wonder whether our neighbors can really be brothers and sisters is because it can be rare to see God’s love displayed, fully and deeply, among those gathered. Let’s challenge our sameness, embracing unity in diversity. Let’s refuse to let people be alone, inviting them to join us, whether it’s during services, activities or social times. Let’s invite others to join us.

And as we learn more about our new identity, we can reflect on the economy and priorities of our new household. God consistently urges us to care for the orphan, the widow and the immigrant. God announces, *“If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry”* (Ex. 22:23). The Spirit moves us not to just cry *“Abba, Amma”* for our own needs, but to respond to the cries of our neighbors by welcoming, caring and loving those we meet, particularly those who we normally don’t see, those who are reserved, those who are afraid of not fitting in or being church hurt. This is often where waiting, patiently and actively, makes a big difference.

Jesus makes it possible to live life with joy and hope. When we accept him and believe, the gift of God’s Spirit is ours. God’s Spirit comes with expectations, though. We welcome anyone, anytime to worship and spend time with us. And we’ll care for them without question. This is the minimum expectation. It’s like meeting someone on the porch or in the lobby. Building a relationship means sitting across from someone and sharing with them, whether it’s at a table in our social hall or at home in your living room. We become connected.

But do you know where the family is? They’re in the kitchen, fixing the meal, serving, laughing, loving, living and learning together. This is what Jesus expects of his family. And it’s the expectations we have for members of our church. Membership is entirely voluntary.

Let's welcome and receive our neighbors in the same way we've been received, with grace and love. Russell Moore says he was reluctant to adopt at first, because he assumed an adopted child would be more distant than a child of his own. Today, he knows better. There are no adopted children of God, as if they were somehow lesser. Adoption tells us how we came into the family of God. Once we are here, no distinction is drawn between those at the table. Love based on genetic material is not a Christian view of reality. All are God's children. All are given grace. All are loved by God. All are valued and worthy.

Finally, Paul spends a fair amount of time talking about groaning. The metaphor he uses is pregnancy. Just as a mother waits and groans through the pain and suffering of childbirth, she has an attitude of joyful anticipation. She waits to meet the new child, the new creation. For the gift of creation is given to women and it is a blessing. Men have a role, but we have much to learn about this kind of commitment and sense of joyful anticipation.

But Paul's lesson doesn't end there. Paul shows us how creation itself is groaning with anticipation. The Message offers this translation, *"All around us we observe a pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it's not only around us; it's within us. The Spirit of God is arousing us within. We're also feeling the birth pangs. These ... bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us, any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in the waiting. We, of course, don't see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.*

Meanwhile, the moment we get tired in the waiting, God's Spirit is right alongside helping us along. If we don't know how or what to pray, it doesn't matter. God does our praying in and for us, making prayer out of our wordless sighs, our aching groans. God knows us far better than we know ourselves, knows our pregnant condition, and keeps us present before God. That's why we can be so sure that every detail in our lives of love for God is worked into something good" (8:22-28, MSG).

The kingdom of God has been described as a kingdom of rescued children. Solomon sang, *“For God delivers the needy when they call, the poor and the one who has no helper.”* (Psalm 72:12). When we care, we’re doing more than activism. A culture of openness and adoption announces the kingdom of God and invites others to belong. And, as we care for each other, so we are to care for creation as well. I’ll speak more on creation care at another time.

Sadly, the universe around us is silent like an orphanage in which the children no longer believe they will be heard. But if we listen carefully, we can hear the quiet desperation of thumbs being sucked, of restless movement, and cribs thumping. And as we welcome those who have been orphaned by the world into our church and our homes, we can show the world what it means to belong to a God who welcomes everyone with love.

Let's remember: we were orphans once, and someone came looking for us, someone who taught us to call him “Abba, Amma.” Let's be ambassadors for the One who loves all the little children of the world. Like Jesus, let's welcome everyone to our table, our church, our homes, and our lives, especially those we aren't supposed to want. Do so with love and you'll be amazed because the way of love is the way of life and light.

There is no fear in perfect love. Amen.

Romans 8:12-27 (CEB)

So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, "Abba, Father." The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.

I believe that the present suffering is nothing compared to the coming glory that is going to be revealed to us. The whole creation waits breathless with anticipation for the revelation of God's sons and daughters. Creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice - it was the choice of the one who subjected it - but in the hope that the creation itself will be set free from slavery to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of God's children. We know that the whole creation is groaning together and suffering labor pains up until now. And it's not only the creation. We ourselves who have the Spirit as the first crop of the harvest also groan inside as we wait to be adopted and for our bodies to be set free. We were saved in hope. If we see what we hope for, that isn't hope. Who hopes for what they already see? But if we hope for what we don't see, we wait for it with patience.

In the same way, the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don't know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans. The one who searches hearts knows how the Spirit thinks, because he pleads for the saints, consistent with God's will.