

July 23, 2023
Romans 8:12-25

Pentecost 8
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“When You’re Here, You’re Family”

“For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.”

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During our trips to the States, we have occasionally eaten at Olive Garden, a major chain restaurant that features Italian food along with unlimited salad and breadsticks. While it may not be as authentic as some Italian restaurants at which we have eaten, especially in New York City and Philadelphia, we have never had a bad experience there and found their food and atmosphere quite acceptable. One time when we were eating at an Olive Garden in the Pittsburgh area, I noticed on the top of the menu their slogan: *“When you’re here, you’re family.”* I am sure that they meant to convey a message of welcome to all who dined at the restaurant, that they were to be considered not as mere patrons but as persons welcomed to a family dinner table. It evoked memories of family dinners at which all were welcomed not only to share food but the love and fellowship that are hallmarks of such family gatherings.

But as our meal continued, I also thought about other aspects of family dinners. When you are a part of the family, you are not only welcomed to share in the meal but are also expected to help in the preparation, serving, and cleaning up that are involved in such dinners. When I was at our family dinners, there was no way that I would merely sit down and have others wait on me like in a restaurant; such behaviour would usually be greeted by such comments as “what do you think I am, your servant?” I would be instructed to set the table, help out in the kitchen, take our guests’ coats, make sure they had drinks, bring the food out of the kitchen to the dining room, help clear the table, and remain in the kitchen to help with the washing of the dishes and putting them away. Being a member of the family meant that I not only enjoyed the privilege of sharing family meals but also the responsibility of serving and caring for other members of the family. As Paul Achtemeier writes, *“to be a member of a family confers upon a person certain privileges and responsibilities toward other members of that family that are among the closest of family ties. To be a member of a family means one shares with others a common life shared in mutual interdependence.”*

The privileges and responsibilities that are at the heart of being a member of a family are also central to our understanding of our relationship to God and to each other in the Church. In Holy Baptism, we believe that *“we are reborn children of God and made members of the church which is the body of Christ.”* (ELW Holy Baptism). We believe that we are connected to one another not as mere members of an organization but as a family that has been brought together by our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, and that through our baptism into his death and resurrection we have become *“children of the heavenly Father”* who believe that *“neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever”* (ELW Hymn 781). We believe that because we have been adopted as God’s beloved children in the waters of Holy Baptism that, in the words of St. Paul, we are *“children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ”* (Romans 8:16-17). As God’s promise to God’s children is everlasting, so also are those who have been incorporated into God’s family heirs to *“an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who are being protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.”* (1 Peter 1:4-5). It may be said that when we are gathered as the Church of Jesus Christ, we are family.

- The knowledge that we are children of God – and that we may be fully assured of it – is not derived from ourselves or from the law. It is the witness of the Holy Spirit who bears witness to it, against the law and the feeling of our own unworthiness, and in spite of our weakness he makes us fully assured of it.” – Martin Luther.

Our identity as children of God is addressed by Paul in his letter to the Romans, which Luther regarded as the most important book of the New Testament and in many ways the book that is at the heart of our Lutheran understanding and proclamation of the Christian faith. It is in Romans that Paul proclaims that our salvation is not a human accomplishment but has been attained through Christ’s death and resurrection, an act of grace that is solely God’s loving act toward humanity for which our appropriate response is to *“thank and praise, serve and obey him”* (*Small Catechism*).

- “For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus ... For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.” – 3:22-24, 28.
- “But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.” – 5:8.

- “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” – 6:3-5.

Since we have been liberated from the bondage to “*sin, death, and the power of the devil*” (*Small Catechism*) through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, and since our status as children of God is the result of God’s gracious, steadfast love for us, Paul states that the basic truth about Christians is that we are debtors to God, the God who made us children and heirs: “*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh – for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.*” (8:12-13). Following a habit found elsewhere in Romans, Paul never actually finished the sentence he begins. He breaks off the statement “*we are debtors*” to say what his readers are *not* indebted to, warning them against continuing to live “*according to the flesh,*” a recognition that the present body, corruptible and heading for death, is not all it might be and not all it will be in the resurrection, and “*to use its possibilities and potentialities as the yardstick for what one ought to be doing is to take orders from that which will turn to dust, and so to come back again under the tyranny of death.*” (N.T. Wright). The alternative is to see the death-bound inclinations of the present body for what they are, and to anticipate the verdict of the grave by putting them to death here and now, for “*those who are led by the Spirit will find that the Spirit’s inner agency enables them, if they will, to say ‘no’ to the practices that carry the smell of death with them.*” (Wright).

It is those who are “*led by the Spirit of God [who] are children of God.*” (8:14), to whom this status of divine adoption has been given. The image here is taken from the wilderness wanderings of Israel in Exodus, where the newly liberated people of God are led by the pillar of cloud and fire:

- “The LORD went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.” – Exodus 13:21-22.
- “In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all night long with a fiery light.” – Psalm 78:14.

The Holy Spirit now does for God's people what the tabernacling presence of God did in the wilderness, assuring them of divine adoption and leading them forward to their inheritance. As the Lord led the people of Israel out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt, so also does Paul assure his readers that they also "*did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.*" (8:15). Paul is stating that "*the pillar of cloud and fire is not leading you back to Egypt!*" Because the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus, the Son of God, it is the Spirit of adoption as children of God, so that they may also know God in the same loving, intimate way in which Jesus knew his heavenly Father: "*When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heir of God and joint heirs with Christ*" (8:15b-17a). God is known in an intimate, familiar relationship for which this term *Abba*, an Aramaic word used by adults as well as children, a term that is tender and personal, is most appropriate. It is a way of making Jesus' prayers one's own, and of sharing in the relationship that was the hallmark of Jesus' relationship with the Father: "*Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want*" (Mark 14:36).

If we are God's children, then we are also God's heirs and fellow heirs with the Messiah. But being a member of the family carries with it not only such privileges and status; it also means sharing the responsibilities and obligations that are central to being a family member. If we are truly children of God, "*heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ,*" it also means that "*we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*" (8:17b). As Jesus solemnly warned his followers, there is a cost involved in being a disciple and joint heir with Christ; the road to the inheritance, the path to glory, lies on the road to suffering:

- "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes to the glory of his Father with the holy angels." – Mark 8:34-38.

Our obligation as members of the family of God that is the assembly of the baptized children of God is not to the world of the "flesh," the ways of sin that are in rebellion against God, but to the new world into which the Spirit has gathered us. To honour that new obligation means life, as following the ways of the flesh means death; for

“the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (6:23). God’s Spirit makes us members of God’s family; if we share God as Father with Jesus, then as children of God we are members of God’s family.

- “To be led by God’s Spirit, therefore, means to have changed our future from death to life, to have changed our relationship to God from rebellion to obedience, and to have changed our status from rebellious enemy to beloved child.” – Achtemeier.

But to be a child of God against whom the world stands in rebellion means that this same antagonism will also be directed at us; this is why Paul warns that *“we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.”* Suffering at the hands of a world dominated by the “flesh” is a sign that we no longer belong to that world and have become members of a different family, the family of God.

While Paul does not downplay the seriousness of the suffering that children of God might have to endure (Paul described his own sufferings in 2 Corinthians 11:16-29), he emphasizes that *“I consider that the sufferings of this present time as not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”* (8:18). Earlier in Romans, he speaks of suffering as leading to patience and hope: *“we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.”* (5:3-5). The glory that will be revealed for those who are in Christ Jesus will far outweigh the sufferings that have to be endured in the present; *“for this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.”* (2 Corinthians 4:17). Because Christians are “in Christ,” the true life is already present, but hidden, and waiting to be revealed when Christ is revealed in glory.

To be a member of the family of God means that we have been bound to Christ and to each other *“with cords that cannot be broken”* in the *“unity of heart and mind [that] is like to that above”* (ELW Hymn 656). As we are joint heirs of the glorious inheritance that is for all God’s children, it also means that we share responsibilities with each other to both care for one another and to be faithful stewards of the proclamation of the Gospel that our Lord has entrusted to us. It means that we *“share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear”*; it also means that we share the glorious good news that *“from sorrow, toil, and pain, and sin we shall be free; and perfect love and friendship reign*

through all eternity.” It means that we share with the whole creation in waiting with excitement for us as God’s children to be revealed as we really are, for God’s covenant faithfulness is always aimed at putting the whole world to rights: *“For the promise that he would inherit the world did not come to Abraham or to his descendants through the law but through the righteousness of faith”* (4:13). Creation itself is pointed toward the new world that is to be, the promise of a “new heaven and a new earth” that is the fulfillment of the promise God made through the prophets:

- “For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth; the former things will not be remembered or come to mind.” – Isaiah 65:17.
- “For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the LORD, so shall your descendants and your name remain.” – Isaiah 66:22.

The creation that *“waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God”* is the same creation that *“will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.”* (8:19-21). No longer will creation punish or work against human beings; with the transformation of reality, creation will regain its original goodness; for *“creation yearns to be free of the restraint of corruption placed on it by Adam’s disobedience, a yearning it shares with all of humanity.”* (Achte-meier).

As creation *“has been groaning in labour pains until now,”* so also are those who have been reborn as children of God *“groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies”* (8:22-23). To “wait” (*apekdichametha*) implies excited expectation of the day when our Lord *“will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself”* (Philippians 3:21). It means that as children of God we live in that hope that is built into the Christian experience from the start and remains one of its central characteristics, the hope that will *“fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit”* (15:13). Because of this, the Christian is called to patience (*“But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience”* – 8:25), a patience that is no mere passing of time but is rooted in our sure and certain hope because we have already had a taste of its fulfillment: the Holy Spirit who is the power of the restoration between God and God’s creation.

- “A Christian should look at this temporal life with closed or blinking eyes, but he should look at the future eternal life with eyes wide open and in clear bright

light. We should have only our left hand in this life here on earth, but with our right hand, with our soul, and with our whole heart we should be in the other life, in heaven, and should wait for it always with certain hope and a joyful mind.” – Luther, 1531.

We have been gathered through our baptism into Christ Jesus into the Church which is the assembly of all believers, the gathering of God’s people around Word and Sacrament. As we share this faith in “*one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all*” (Ephesians 4:5-6), so also do we share responsibilities for the care of this Holy Word that has been entrusted to us, as we care for one another as beloved children of God. As “children of the heavenly Father” share in the eternal inheritance that awaits us, we also share in the household duties that are critical for the health of the Body of Christ and its mission to “*proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*” (1 Peter 2:9).

- “Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity’ – this is the Scripture’s praise of life together under the Word. But now we can rightly interpret the words ‘in unity’ to say, ‘for brethren to dwell together *through Christ.*’ For Jesus Christ alone is our unity. ‘He is our peace.’ Through him alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*.

Olive Garden recently changed its slogan from “*when you’re here, you’re family*” to “*the comfort you crave.*” This may have been simply a marketing decision, but it may also be a recognition that being a member of the family is more than being served at table. Being a family member means sharing both the privileges and the responsibilities of household duties, of caring for one another, of making certain that the family fulfills its obligations and responsibilities. We are indeed children of God, members of the family of God through our baptism into Christ Jesus, heirs of the promise that we have been “*sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever.*” When we are gathered here, we are God’s family; may we share in the joys, the challenges, and the responsibilities of this family gathered together and sent out to share God’s love with all people, so that all may know that there is a place for them at this family table in the presence of our Lord who desires all people who come together as God’s beloved children who live in the sure and certain hope that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever ... his the loving purpose solely to preserve them pure and holy.*”

Amen.