

Sermon for Proper 11A

The Text: Romans 8:12-17

The story is told of a young lad by the name of Ben. He was born out of wedlock and lived alone with his mother. He grew up in an era where such children were horribly ostracized. He was treated as an illegitimate child in the way he was ignored in the school playground and in the way he was shunned by the adults of the town in the street. He did not belong. He was not accepted. Sadly, the same thing even happened in his church community.

One day a new pastor came to serve in the little church in Ben's town. He had a reputation of being loving and non-judgmental (quite a contrast to his parishioners). Ben had given up going to church years earlier, but hearing these things about this pastor led him to return. He got there late so he could sneak in the back and he left early so he wouldn't attract any unnecessary attention. But he liked what he heard, so he kept coming back.

It was about his seventh visit in a row when Ben got so caught up in the message that he lost track of time and forgot to leave the church early. In a panic he tried to weave his way out the crowd. As he was doing this, he felt a hand on his shoulder. It was the pastor, who proceeded to ask him the question that had been on everyone's mind since he had been illegitimately born: 'Young man, whose boy are you?'

The church went deathly quiet as Ben froze, unable to provide an answer. But then a smile started to spread across the face of the pastor until it broke into a huge grin. He said, 'Oh! I know whose boy you are! The family resemblance is unmistakable. You are a child of God!'

Having a sense of belonging is one of our primary needs as humans. We need to have relationships where we feel safe and secure. To belong to a family and to be accepted by them is a precious thing. If you don't have this you will know how much of a struggle life can be. Some people in this situation will search in all sorts of places for acceptance.

Whether we choose to acknowledge it or not there is also a deeper longing within us. There is a desire in us to belong to God and be accepted by him. We want to be welcomed into his family. We want to know that God's face lights up when he thinks of us and that he truly wants to welcome us with open arms.

In our Romans reading we heard the Apostle Paul tell us that this is the reality. He said: *'You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received*

the Spirit of sonship' (verse 15). The word for 'sonship' is sometimes translated as 'adoption'.

But despite hearing this, it can sound too good to be true. As an adopted child am I really legitimate, do I really belong? Am I really accepted completely? For we also hear in the Romans text: *'if I live according to the sinful nature, I will die'*. We know only too well the struggle we have with sin and this serves only to give rise to doubts in our minds. What would it take for God to disown us and kick us out of his family?

The devil has a field day with these doubts. He is not referred to as *'the one who accuses [us] before our God day and night'* for no reason (Revelation 12:10). He would have us believe that we are illegitimate children; that we do not belong and cannot be accepted. It is only a matter of time before our sin leads to our exclusion from God's family—another case of an adopted child who unfortunately didn't quite fit in to the family.

What a liar the devil is. Thankfully his is not the only voice we hear. There is someone else who taps us on the shoulder and tells us: *"You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children"* (Romans 8:15-16).

The Greek word for 'sonship' or 'adoption' is really two words put together. The one word means 'son' and the other word means 'to lay something down' or 'to place something in position'. Our status in God's family has come about because God has chosen to place us in the position of his 'son' or 'daughter'.

And it is the Holy Spirit who taps us on the shoulder and presents this reality to us. It is the Spirit who convinces us of our status in God's family as his children. It is the Spirit who assures us that we do belong, that we are accepted and that we are in God's family legitimately.

Our sin, and our struggle with it, does not disqualify us from being God's children. The apostle Paul used the same word for adoption in his letter to the Galatians. He wrote: *"When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons and daughters. Because you are sons and daughters, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, 'Abba, Father'"* (Galatians 4:4-6).

When it came to including us in his family, God didn't just tell us it was possible. He sent his Son to make it possible. Our legitimacy as God's children has come about because of what Jesus has done for us.

That is why at the start of chapter 8 we hear Paul say: *'there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death'*. Earlier still Paul wrote: *'God gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they are'* (4:17).

There was a time when we were not God's children, when we were separated from him because of our sin. But that time has gone. He has washed us clean in the blood of his Son, cleansed us through the waters of baptism and drawn us legitimately into his family by his grace. And this belonging and acceptance is not a fragile thing. Many of you know how the Apostle Paul ends this wonderful section of his letter to the Romans, saying, *'I am convinced that [nothing is] able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord'* (8:38-39).

But we still need convincing, you and I. As a result of the struggle with sin that rages within and around us we can feel so illegitimate at times. We can feel so unworthy and un-loveable. How can God accept us the way we are?

Watchman Nee was a Chinese church leader who conducted his ministry in the first half of the last century. He was arrested in 1952 and imprisoned until his death in 1972. He tells the story about a new convert who came in deep distress to see him. He said, 'No matter how much I pray, no matter how hard I try, I cannot seem to be faithful to my Lord. I think I'm losing my salvation.'

Nee said to him, 'Do you see this dog here? He is my dog. He is house-trained; he never makes a mess; he is obedient; he is a pure delight to me. Out in the kitchen I have a son, a baby son. He makes a mess, he throws his food around, he fouls his clothes, he is a total mess. But who is going to inherit my kingdom? Not my dog; my son is my heir. You are Jesus Christ's heir because it is for you that He died.'

It was for you and I that Jesus died and that gives us all the legitimacy we need. The Apostle Paul wrote: *'Since we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ'* (8:17). We do not have to be fearful that we have not done enough to earn our right to be God's children. For we *'did not receive a spirit that makes us slaves again to fear'*.

We accept in faith the conviction of the Holy Spirit that we are God's children. We believe that our legitimacy as God's child is as a result of nothing more and nothing less than the work of Jesus. Jesus has conquered our sin – the sin of our past, the sin of our present and the sin of our future. Jesus has cancelled the debt of that sin in his body on the Cross.

Our names are written in the book of life and nothing can separate us from that. We can legitimately call on God as our Father, we can celebrate Jesus as our brother and we can enjoy the presence of the Spirit as our Counsellor. We are the children of God. We are his family and we can live with that freedom and in that freedom every day of our lives. Amen.