

God's Greater Story – God, Our Father

6th Sun. after Pent. – 07/12/20 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Romans 8:12-17 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 15 “...but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Introduction

- ⊗ We continue our series of sermons through the readings from Paul’s letter to the Romans today by considering two more pieces of art. They’re both printed inside the front of our bulletin today (or at the beginning of the Home Worship Materials if you’re listening to this online).
 - ➔ One is a painting and the other is an etching. The artist is the same for both – Rembrandt; and the subject matter for both is the return of the prodigal son. Yet there is a world of difference between the two.
 - ➔ In 1636, Rembrandt created a small etching of this scene. Then, 32 years later, he returned to the subject and painted his larger masterpiece called, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*.
- ⊗ To highlight some of the differences between the two works you’ll see in the etching that Rembrandt focuses upon action. There is movement throughout. People are descending a staircase. Some are watching their step. One looks to the side, another looks downward, but all are rushing to join the father who has himself rushed out to lean over and embrace his son.
 - ➔ It’s as if Rembrandt catches the father in mid-stride.
- ⊗ In the painting, however, Rembrandt creates a sense of stillness. His focus is on presence rather than action. No one is moving. All of the people, whether standing or sitting, are gazing upon one central experience; the father, leaning over his son; the son, leaning into his father and the two of them locked in an eternal embrace.
 - ➔ It’s almost as if time has stopped so that we can see that one moment; that eternal moment when the father acknowledges, claims, receives, blesses ... yes, loves his son.
- ⊗ Tied together with Paul’s message in our Epistle Reading today, what Rembrandt has sought to capture is a moment of sonship; of being claimed as someone’s child.
 - ➔ Last week Paul revealed Christ to us as our Deliverer. Now, he directs our eyes upon God, our Father. Rescued by Christ from the power of sin, we are now children of God. Yes, God claims you in Christ, no matter your biological gender, to be His son. But what does it mean to be claimed as God’s son?

I. First Focus: Not a Slave but a Son

- ⊗ To answer that question, Paul creates a contrast; the contrast between slaves and sons. He says again in verse 15, “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’”
 - ➔ Notice how Paul turns our attention to our relations with the Father as we cry out to Him in prayer. Jesus taught us in Matthew 6:9, “Pray then like this: ‘Our Father in heaven...’.” Paul zeros in on that introduction to the *Lord’s Prayer*; he freezes there and asks us to consider what it means to be God’s son.
- ⊗ A close look at Rembrandt’s painting, shows what this looks like. We see that the son’s head is on his father’s bosom while the father uses his hands to draw the son closer to himself.
 - ➔ What’s strange, though, is that the son looks less like a son and more like slave, doesn’t he? His head is shaven; his clothes look more like those of a prisoner and his closed eyes make him

look exhausted. When we consider all this son has been through, we recall that he willingly offers himself as a slave before his father.

→ Yet the father, in his extraordinary love, reaches down to claim this slave as his own son. He lovingly places his hands upon the son and draws him to himself. This child is no longer a slave but a son; not a prisoner but a child of God.

- ✘ Henri Nouwen, a priest and devotional writer, once told about a time when he shared this same picture with others. For him, the son looked like a prisoner as well; like the victim of a concentration camp with his head shaven. A woman in the group, however, offered a different view. She looked closely at the painting and told him that she saw, not the head of a prisoner, but that of a newborn child (Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 54.)

→ That comment really captures the mystery of what Jesus and Paul both teach us in Scripture; that the one who has been a slave to his own passions is made new – by the love of his Father, into a son!

- ✘ Paul recounts in our text how our natural sinful passions consume us and take us far from the kingdom of God. If we “live according to the flesh”, Paul says in verse 13, we “will die”. Yet God has brought us to life in the death of His Son.

→ The fact that Jesus rose from death in victory over sin means now that Jesus brings you and me into the kingdom of His Father.

- ✘ Now in worship, as well as our daily repentance and faith in Jesus, we bring our slavery before God. We confess the ways that we have been less than God’s children; the ways we have been enslaved to the experiences and rule of this world.

→ And in response, our Father runs to us in Jesus; places His hands upon us and draws us near to His heart in love. As Paul writes in verse 16, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God”. Yes, verse 15 says that the Spirit cries out with your spirit, “Abba, Father”.

- ✘ Buried deep in the minor details of our hymnals, the Church reminds us of these actions in both the baptism liturgy and in the pastor’s commendation of the dying.

→ So whether that person is being baptized or leaving this earthly life, the pastor places his hand upon the person and asks everyone gathered around that person to pray the Lord’s Prayer. So if you were baptized as an infant, the congregation said the Lord’s Prayer on your behalf. And if you are lying there, unconscious and about to die, the pastor and the church again pray it for you.

→ Why? Because it’s at that moment that God comes and claims you as His child. And in the Lord’s Prayer, you respond to God your Father; calling out in affirmation that as the Father’s “son” nothing, not even death, can take that away from you.

- ✘ Later in this service, we will pray the Lord’s Prayer together. As you pray, think about that moment. It is not just a repetitive prayer. It is the working of the Spirit, through whom your loving Father reaches out and places His hands upon you, drawing you close to His bosom in love.

II. Second Focus: Not a Debtor but an Heir

- ✘ When Jesus taught us in the Lord’s Prayer to pray to our Father, He also taught us to pray, “Thy kingdom come”. Paul reminds us of this petition in our text when he says, “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be

glorified with Him” (vv. 16-17). “Heirs of God” – these words are necessary for us to understand; so necessary in our world today.

→ Because daily we are bombarded by messages that try to take God’s kingdom away from us. Just open any magazine you choose and take a moment to consider the advertisements. They are filled with images that draw you away from the things of God and back to the things of this world. Hair care products, cell phones, fine clothing, fine food, vacation get-aways and new cars. All the riches of this world are set on display before you so that the life you now have seems less significant than the life you could have.

With hard work, a bit of luck, a trip to the casino or a shrewd investment in the stock market, the world wants you to believe that you will be able to leave this pathetic little life you have now behind and live in all the luxuries of this world.

→ There in the pages of the magazine the Words of God to His people to not covet the things of others; to love your spouse and your children; to be content with the calling into which you’ve been called; to rise out of bed and labor for the good of others; and to draw near to one another in the household of God – these words, this life, this church that God has made is made to look in the media as so outdated. Instead America is portrayed as the promised land; the place where we can indulge our desires, make something of ourselves, get ahead in this world, and, if we keep a little bit of religion in our back pocket, trust that we will be blessed in the world to come.

→ Paul refers to it all in verse 13 as living “according to the flesh”. Living that way, Paul says, “you will die”.

✘ Being a child of God, however, means something so much more than just trying to accomplish the American dream.

→ Consider, for example, that moment in the history of Israel when Moses stood before God on the mountain. Israel had sinned against God and aroused His anger to the point that God threatened to destroy His own people.

→ Moses interceded for them and in response God offered Moses a vision of life in the Promised Land with vineyards, olive groves, fields for barley and wheat, pastures for cattle and sheep, cities and open spaces, where the land flowed with milk and honey. God said they could have all of it, but without Him; He would not go with them into the Promised Land as they were.

✘ But Moses put the magazine aside with all of its tempting glossy pictures. He knew that without God, they would have nothing. As Jesus said in Mark 8:36, “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul?”

→ So Moses came before God with nothing to offer. He simply relied on God’s mercy and prayed in Exodus 33:15, “If your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up from here”. Moses knew that one cannot really have the kingdom without the presence of God.

✘ Paul likewise focuses upon our relationship toward God rather than the things of this world. We are heirs, he says; heirs of God; not just heirs of a kingdom. Our inheritance as believers is God’s promise that He goes with us.

→ He has called us together as His people and sent us out to live lives here in this world that look different from those around us. That means that we will bless and not curse; we will be content with all that God has given us already; we will labor for the good of others and draw near to each other in the household of God. We will be content – knowing that, in God’s kingdom, His presence is enough.

- ✘ If you look at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son, it appears the story is frozen just before the son receives His father's gifts. No robe is wrapped around the son yet; his father's ring is not on his finger and he has no good shoes on his feet. No, what the son does have is his father and being in his father's presence. He now trusts everything else will be enough.
 - ➔ So it is that our Lord has called you and me to live as His people in faith. When Jesus called His disciples to take up their cross and follow Him, He meant that life in this world will not be easy. But it will be filled with God's love.
 - ➔ And now with the Spirit's power and lead, Paul says in verse 16, that we "bear witness"; we proclaim that miraculous truth that we are children of God; and we work in our Father's kingdom with the primary goal of bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.
- ✘ Notice how Paul closes this by saying in verse 17, "we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with Him in order that we may also be glorified with Him".
 - ➔ We can't follow Christ, dear Christians, without always keeping in mind His suffering; without being comfortable with the fact that living as a Christian in this world today means putting the things of this world aside – maybe even removing them from our lives altogether.
 - ➔ But that is just fine, because ultimately, as Children of God, we know that one day we will be joined to Jesus in His eternal glory.

Conclusion

- ✘ Remember, I said that 32 years had passed between Rembrandt's sketch and his painting of the prodigal son's return. During that time he lost his wife, his wealth, three of his four children, and his reputation. Then he lost his last and only surviving son.
 - ➔ Jesus said in John 16:33, "In the world, you will have tribulation, but take heart; I have overcome the world". After losing all that our world would say gives life meaning, Rembrandt chose to focus upon the one thing that Jesus gives to us that this world cannot take away – the Spirit of adoption.
- ✘ Yes, God, the Father, claims you to be His child in the grace-drenched waters of your baptism. All we can bring is our slavery to sin. Yet in Jesus, those sins are forgiven and our future is secure.
 - ➔ We are made children of God; children and heirs; heirs of a new world and a new kingdom to be revealed when Jesus returns. But more importantly, we are heirs of God Himself. That is Paul's assurance for you this morning: God the Father loves you; forgives you; embraces you; and claims you as His people; as His child, because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus His Son. Amen.