

Adoption: God's Greatest Gift

Reconnect – October 11, 2009

Text: Ephesians 1:3-6, Galatians 4:3-7, Romans 18:14-17, John 1:10-13

Key Thought: Adoption is God's greatest gift – but to choose it we must see the whole picture: that it is beautiful and hard at the same time.

How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ. Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the wonderful kindness he has poured out on us because we belong to his dearly loved Son. Ephesians 1:3-6, NLT

Pre-Intro: Stuart Little [video]

Intro: A (not-so) perfect world of adoption

- If you're anything like me, at some point in your life, this is what you've thought adoption was like
- I certainly did – a world where everything was clear – there was bad, there was good, there was a way to make everything right – those who adopted were heroes, those who WERE adopted were instantly part of a new, perfect life, and everyone lived happily ever after, with blue skies and all
- I thought this way... until I actually became more familiar with adoption – and then I realized, that movies are movies, and life is much more complicated, with the beautiful and the difficult all wrapped up together
- So, if you're relying on Stuart Little for an accurate view of adoption today, well, you're going to have some problems (By the way – did anyone catch Hugh Laurie there? House? Everyone starts somewhere...!)
- Because, if there's a word that describes adoption today, it would probably be "complicated"
- We read about Children's Aid Societies that are abusing their powers – families that are torn apart – children that are caught in the middle, and wind up suffering terribly
- We read about adopted children who are now adults, suing governments to try to get access to much needed medical records, who are talking about the hurt and the pain they have felt their whole lives, not knowing who they really were
- We read about adoption agencies going bankrupt, and hundreds of desperate, would-be parents in shock as they see their dreams vanishing
- We read about celebrity after celebrity that adopts children from around the world – but are they doing it for the sake of the child, or for the sake of their image?
- And then, of course, there are always the tragedies – the adopted child who was troubled, who winds up hurting themselves or others
- Not to mention the movies, where adoption is a plot twist that gets used again and again, everywhere from Disney to slasher films
- With that kind of press, it doesn't sound like there's any way to see it as "God's greatest gift" – so what about THAT, anyway?
- And yet, the apostle Paul, the writer of so much of the second part of the Bible, the New Testament, who did so much to introduce Christianity to the rest of the world outside Palestine – he could say this:

How we praise God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly realms because we belong to Christ. Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure. So we praise God for the wonderful kindness he has poured out on us because we belong to his dearly loved Son.

Ephesians 1:3-6, NLT

- Clearly he saw something, to be using the idea of adoption to explain what God wants to do with us

Adoption: what about it?

- To get a better handle on what Paul saw, we have to go back to his time, to the Roman Empire
- Adoption has been around just about as long as people have – it’s mentioned in the code of Hammurabi, practised by many ancient societies – the idea of giving a place in a family to someone who was not related by blood
- Possibly the earliest documented example would be the story of Moses, in the Bible – given up by his desperate parents due to an attempted genocide by the Egyptian Pharaoh, he is found by Pharaoh’s daughter, and the princess adopts him into the royal court (he winds up getting his birth mother for a nurse...!) – that would have likely been around 1300BC or so
- Two kinds of adoption in the Roman Empire – one, of adults – where one person would “adopt” another adult, so that they could take care of their estate and mourn them properly after they passed away – this was much more common, especially in Roman society – the idea of adoption was more for the sake of the one adopting than for the adoptee
- Second kind was much more rare – adopting a child without a family or without a future and raising them as one’s own child (the kind we’re much more familiar with today) where it’s done “in the best interests of the child” (the motto, anyway)
- It was rare, because in Roman society, children were seen as a nuisance as much as anything: In Roman society, the *paterfamilias* (the head of the family) had absolute power over his own children, and could “expose” them (abandon them, often outside their doorsteps) or sell them into slavery on a whim, with no legal repercussions
 - This is the world of St. Paul – where children aren’t valued, and where you are fortunate to reach adulthood – a world where adoption is generally only done to benefit yourself, not the one you’re adopting, for the sake of social status or to show off how great you are
 - But Paul reaches back to an earlier time – to the history of his own people – and turns this idea upside down, where there is a Father who desires to bring people into His family, not for His own sake or because of trying to fill some need of His own, but to benefit them and shower them with His love – God is opening up wide the doors of His household and welcoming people and folding them into his love and his family – unexpected, undeserved... beautiful

Adoption is beautiful

- Adoption is beautiful – of the three things I'd like to stress this morning, that's the first – "adoption is beautiful"
- John Piper, who is a Christian pastor and writer, has this to say about it: "Adoption is greater than the universe" (and he has a Youtube spot where he talks about it, too)
- Here's some of what he says in it:

...Why wouldn't I want to adopt? Because I'm doing something so phenomenally big, so phenomenally at the centre of reality. When God was thinking about how to create a universe, what was centrally driving him was, "How can I create a universe in which my grace would be put on display most beautifully?" – John Piper

- He's not just talking about some spiritual theory or metaphor, either – at the same time, he's encouraging people to make the decision themselves to adopt children – and so does his church, whether domestically adopting kids in the US (especially those who are less likely to be adopted) or adopting kids internationally out of state-run orphanages – and I like that they do all of that
- Let's put aside any previous experience you have with adoption, whether arms-length, through the media, or perhaps up close and personal: we could probably agree that all things being equal, the idea of a family welcoming and making a place for a child who doesn't have a family of their own, is a beautiful thing
- There are children all over the world today who are starving, who are suffering from disease, who are trying to support their brothers and sisters, because they don't have a mom or a dad anymore – or they've maybe never even known what it's like to have a parent
- Can you imagine? Maybe you can – maybe you've been there
- I can't imagine – I grew up in a home with two parents who loved me, even if they didn't love each other – I didn't have to worry about where I was going to sleep at night, or whether I was going to have enough to eat (I REALLY didn't have to worry about that!), or whether I was going to be safe – I knew all of those things, rock solid – while some other parts of my childhood were no picnic, those things were non-negotiable
- And yet for so many children, those are just dreams, nothing more
- The adoption fantasy that is at the core of so many fairy tales, so many comic books, so many stories and movies – you know, the one that says that you might be an orphan, but your parents are on the way – or you're an orphan, but your adoptive family is coming – what Annie sings about in the orphanage late at night, in the clip that we watched earlier – that "fantasy" is there because hidden in it is some kernel of truth
- There are children who dream that one day they will be brought into a loving family, with a new name and a new future

- There are even parents right now who dream of a new life for their children – when I was in the Dominican Republic in 2002, we were building a school in a *batey* just on the edge of the capital city of Santo Domingo, and we had parents coming up to us and asking us to take their children with us – just like we did in Africa the next year
- What brings you to that point of desperation? What kind of situation makes you believe that the most loving thing you can do for your children is to give them away? The hope of something better
- **Adoption is beautiful** – listen to what Paul had to say about it, in Galatians 4:3-7

That’s the way it was before Christ came. We were slaves to the spiritual powers of this world. But when the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because you Gentiles have become his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, and now you can call God your dear Father. Now you are no longer a slave but God’s own child. And since you are his child, everything he has belongs to you.

Galatians 4:3-7, NLT

- Paul uses the picture of children, going from slavery to royalty in an instant, because of the love of God
- In our so-called “classless society” of today, that image loses its force – in our comfortable middle-class ways, we can ignore crushing poverty and hopelessness – but it’s a reality in so many locations around the world
- He says that we all were slaves – every one of us – to our own desires, our own dreams, our own pain, our own twisted perceptions and relationships and addictions – before God sent his Son Jesus, to buy our freedom with his life
- He walked into the orphanage, the squalor of our lives, and led us out into the sunlight – and more than that, brought us to our new home, where everything He has is ours – incredible and undeserved and... beautiful
- Whether spiritual or physical, the idea of adoption is beautiful – beautiful enough that God chose it for his own Son
- Jesus was adopted – born to a teenage, unwed mother, without a future due to being in the eyes of his culture “illegitimate”, a contractor named Joseph marries his mother and adopts him as his own and loves him and teaches him all about life, including his trade
- For Jesus too, adoption is beautiful

Adoption is hard:

- But I would learn it's also more than that – adoption is also hard
- It's a difficult thing – it's difficult to do, it's difficult even to have done to you – there are all kinds of tension and pain associated with it
- Imagine that right now I hand you an envelope – and inside it is your new identity
- You don't live where you used to – and you can't go back to get any of your things – whatever you have with you right now, well, that's all you've got
- You now live with other people that you've never met, in a place you know nothing about – the food will be different, your job will be different, even the way people do the most basic things – it will all change
- You don't have a choice or a say in the matter – this is happening today, so don't lose that envelope...!
- And it's a shock that's felt on all sides – the child is never the same again, and the family doing the adopting is never the same again either
- You hope and pray that it's an improvement, that these will just be growing pains, that matters will improve quickly and get better and better as the months and years pass – and much of the time, that does happen – but sometimes, it doesn't, and even if it does, the hurt, the separation, the loneliness is all too real
- Parents second guess themselves, children wonder what they did wrong, and when the next people that they care about will be taken from them, and how will they ever cope?
- You've probably heard of the phrase, "Being put up for adoption"? Ever wonder where it comes from?
 - From about 1854 to 1929, about 150,000 homeless children from the streets of the cities in the Northeastern US were put on trains and shipped out west, to be raised by farmers, either as adopted children, or more often, as workers – sort of like foster care, but the kids actually work for you – an approach that was copied in other countries, including England, where my grandfather was shipped to Canada as a
 - The thought was that outside of the cities that these children would flourish – that the diseases that they suffered from and the crime they turned to would fall away from them once they got outside the city limits and breathed in the fresh air – the Orphan Trains were a creation of a Protestant minister named Charles Loring Brace, and people think he meant well – or at least many people think he did
 - At any rate, listen to this, which I've pulled together from two different sources:

The children ranged from as young as about one year old to age 16 or 17. Limited follow-ups of the children revealed that then, as now, the children who adapted the most readily were usually the younger children, and the older teenagers faced the greatest difficulty in adjusting to a radically different environment. Most of the children were poor, and some had been involved in minor or serious infractions of the law. Many also had siblings and were separated from them for life as a result of the move. Yet many... made successful new lives for themselves, leaving behind them severe poverty and desolation. www.encyclopedia.adoption.com

There were no legal ties between these children and the farmers who took them in. The Children's Aid Society announced to the local community that a train would be arriving. When it did, the children stood on the platform waiting to be claimed. Ashby describes the scene, as told to him by a Minnesota charity worker:

The children, "weary, travel-stained, confused," stood one at a time in front of a large crowd. As an adult described each of them, potential families looked them over. "It's quite a shock," recalled one individual. "You feel like you're on display." ... Children whom no one picked boarded the train for the next stop. The children sometimes performed acts. (1997, p. 49-50)

The phrase "put up" for adoption was thus coined. The children who were "put up" on platforms were recruited from orphanages, almshouses, asylums, and prisons. Workers went door to door in poor neighbourhoods. Some children were brought in by their parents seeking temporary relief, and others came in on their own, wanting to go West. About half were not orphans.

– from Michelle Kahan, "Put up on platforms" – "A History of Twentieth Century Adoption Policy in the United States – from Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare, September 2006

- Talk about the cure being just about as bad as the disease! We shudder to think about that today, and yet at that time it was seen as compassionate and progressive, and the truth is, many of them were leaving behind horrible conditions in the cities, too
- They say that many adopted children grow up with all sorts of insecurities because of what they've been through – anger issues, control issues, commitment issues – not to mention that for so long, adoptive parents were told not to talk about their child's adoption with them, which led to all kinds of questions, guilt and shame too
- Because most times, the children aren't asked or consulted – they have others making decisions for them and doing the best they can – but they are carried along by it
- Sometimes the spiritual side of adoption can get rocky, too – we start to doubt God, we miss our old life, things seem really hard and we want to go back
- Paul had this to say about that:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. So you should not be like cowering, fearful slaves. You should behave instead like God's very own children, adopted into his family – calling him "Father, dear Father." For his Holy Spirit speaks to us deep in our hearts and tells us that we are God's children. And since we are his children, we will share his treasures – for everything God gives to his Son, Christ, is ours, too. But if we are to share his glory, we must also share his suffering.

Romans 18:14-17, NLT

- Christianity – following Jesus, in a trust relationship, where He is put in control, in the centre rather than us ourselves – that's hard, and there's no other way to say it

- It's why God makes such an incredible promise here – that we are able to call him “Dad” – to have that kind of intimacy with God himself, and that He will keep on reassuring us until we believe it's true
- It's hard, but it's necessary, and if we stick with it, it will pay off in the end – but until then, there will be those times where it hurts and hurts bad – adoption is hard

Adoption is a choice

- And yet, God understands – He really gets it
- Adoption comes as a result of hurt – it's a response to pain, to brokenness – you can't have adoption without having that pain first, and that pain lingers even in the presence of healing
- Jesus comes, is adopted himself, and then after he becomes an adult, begins to bring a message of love and acceptance to those around him
- Even still, there are some who still resist, even after they see and hear everything that he does:

Although the world was made through [Jesus], the world didn't recognize him when he came. Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan – this rebirth comes from God.

John 1:10-13, NLT

- What will you and I do with this offer? With this invitation, to become God's child, in all of this beauty, and difficulty, and complexity, in the middle of his love?
- Christian thinker and writer C.S. Lewis says this, in his book called Christian Behaviour:

“...people are often worried. They are told they ought to love God. They cannot find any such feeling in themselves. What are they to do? The answer is the same as before. Act *as if you did*. Don't sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, “If I *were* sure that I loved God, what would I do?” When you have found the answer, go and do it... Nobody can always have devout feelings; and even if we could, feelings are not what God principally cares about. Christian Love, either towards God or towards man, is an affair of the will... But the great thing to remember is that, though our feelings come and go, His love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins or our indifference; and, therefore, it is quite relentless in its determination that we shall be cured of those sins, at whatever cost to us, at whatever cost to Him.” (50)

- Even right now, God wants to pull us to himself, so that we can feel his great love and know our place in his family

Key Thought:

Adoption is God’s greatest gift – but to choose it, we must see the whole picture: that it is beautiful and hard at the same time.

Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.

Ephesians 1:4-5, NLT

Conclusion: Our adoption story, full circle (Grandpa and Conor)

“Adoption is not about finding children for families, it’s about finding families for children”

– Joyce Maguire Pavao

- Talk about the difficulty of Grandpa’s experience, and the different set of challenges for Conor’s today, but the huge difference in both compared to what God does in us and wants to do through us

When I was eight years old I caught mumps and was put in the Infirmary. One evening I was told to look out of the window and wave goodbye to my brother as he was being sent to Canada. He was fifteen years old. I didn't know what this meant, but I waved goodbye. I didn't know I wouldn't see him again for fourteen years. Twenty-four other boys were going as well. They were promised the Good Life. What they didn't say about this Promised Land was that task-masters would work him to a standstill, and that he'd have to combat the raw tyranny of the seasons, the loneliness of the long evenings in a strange house in a strange land with no friends, beyond the reach of any kind of love or affection. He would on many a night cry himself to sleep. He was put on a farm owned by a Mr. and Mrs. Dickie. They put him to work from four o'clock in the morning until sunset. He has told me since that he had to do the family wash, clean the house and work on the farm, wages being next to nothing. He eventually earned the respect of his employers, had a family and bought a home.

(From An English Rose, by Rose Lloyds and George Harris)

- Talk about how adoption needs to be an option – you’ve got two kids, we all do – could you do a third? Could you adopt, now that you might be thinking you’re finished, biologically? Yes, you could...
- There is no greater statement that you can make to your family and friends and those around you, about the truth and impact of what God is doing in your life, than through adopting – talk to us if you’d like more information

Response: Child of God (song)

Bonus Content:

Bella movie

***God even set things up so that Jesus was adopted...! He was willing not only to set something up, but to be a part of it, warts and all. Did he ever feel distant from Joseph? Did Joseph ever not understand him? You betcha! Check out when Jesus was 12... and yet Jesus made the most of it, and the whole family was so much the better for it.

- As society “progressed” after the fall of Rome, adoption actually went in reverse, in Europe – the church discouraged adoption and the rule of *primogeniture* was stressed – where the inheritance falls to the firstborn, and it’s all about blood – in fact, in Victorian England you couldn’t even legally adopt someone
- So orphaned or abandoned children were cared for by the State, in poorhouses or workhouses, à la *Oliver Twist*
- In fact, there were laws protecting animals from cruelty before there were laws protecting children from cruelty – in the 1890’s, in New York City, in a horrific case of child abuse, when an entire neighbourhood begged anyone to act, it was the New York Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals who stepped in and saved a little girl

Talk about Grandpa Harris – his story as an orphan

I was one of the most fortunate Home boys. Many came to Canada and were terribly treated, and brutal at that. The Home authorities had an inspector travel around the different farms where these boys were placed. One day I noticed an auto coming up this country road and who was driving it was an elder Home boy, whom I recognized, so right away I figured may be they were coming to get me to work on some other farmer's place, so I hid in an old carriage house. The people I already knew and lived with were out in the yard, calling "George!" But I stayed quiet until they left the property. I hated to think I might have to change farms. When I explained they got a good laugh out of this.

From “An English Rose”, by Rose Lloyds and George Harris

<http://www.umilta.net/rose.html>

“Most of the children we see at our clinic who are ages four to eight have particular issues with anger. There is a great deal of loss in adoption, and feelings of loss often manifest themselves as anger. People, from the outside, see adoption as a very positive occasion, and, in fact, it is. The birth parents and the adoptive parents, however, have most often gone through a great deal of loss and sadness to get to an adoption decision, and that loss and sadness is passed on directly or indirectly to the child as an underlying fact of adoption. We have learned in recent years that it does not help the child in the long run to disguise the reality of any situation; that it is better to tell the truths and to help the child learn to cope with them...

Control is another prevalent issue for young adopted children. After all, if you’d been separated, moved, had your name change – your whole life changed in an instant – might you not worry about control? Adopted children know it’s not just a fantasy that things can happen to you... As a result they often need to know *everything* that is going to happen and to have it explained many times.”

Joyce Maguire Pavao The Family of Adoption