

An Adoption Story

**A Message Offered by
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Sing to God, sing praises to his name; lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds -- his name is the LORD-- be exultant before him. [The] Father of orphans and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity...

Psalms 68:4-6a NRSV

How many of you here this morning have been foster parents or took in a child for at least part of their childhood? Raise your hands. How many have adopted a child? Wow! And was anyone here adopted into your family? Sure. How many spent time in a foster home or were raised for at least part of your childhood by someone other than a biological parent? Lots of us, including both of my parents.

Thank you for raising your hand and going public about something that we don't talk about that much. But we should. There's no shame in adoption. There's nothing to be embarrassed about. Because we all have an adoption story.

My particular story began about three years ago. Kari and I were thinking, "If we want to grow our family, it's now or never." We considered the options. "Do-it-Yourself," but that came with some real health risks for the baby and for Kari. And international adoption. We began the process but found out that we were a little too old for some countries and many countries were simply putting their programs on hold. And then we thought of the obvious: fostering-to-adopt. My sister adopted two children that way, and our congregation has had other successful stories of adoption through

the county foster program. [Note: If you want to learn more about fostering and how to help kids who are in the system, see Sue Cohick and Lucy Johnston-Walsh after worship.] Two years ago we told you that we were beginning this journey, and we feel like you've been with us the whole way.

Fast forward to April 2010. I had just finished our Thursday morning Bible Study when Pat, the church secretary at the time, said she had an urgent message for me from Kari. Just four hours later Allie arrived with her half-sister. [Note: That sister now lives with her dad. We see her pretty regularly and she's doing well.] Allie was born about a month pre-mature and by the time we got her she was barely five pounds. Many of you held her, rocked her, and changed her in those early days. The boys could not have been happier, and you could not have been more helpful.

Fast forward again to this past Friday when everything became official and complete in Judge Al Masland's courtroom. Just like at the very beginning, when the adoption became final we were once again surrounded by friends from our Second Family

Pastors always want to have some great personal miracle story, one that begins, "For years I wandered deep in sin, but look at me now." Or, "Did I ever tell you about the time I was swallowed by a whale?" Miracles make great testimonies. Now I have my own miracle story. Years ago when we Kari was thinking about a third child, Kari asked what we would name it. We knew that the child would have to fit into our "A-Team" line up, of course, along with Andrew and Aaron. When I suggested that any third child should be named, "Accident" she was not amused. Recently she did point out, however, that "Adoption" begins with "A." And of course so does, "Allie," which is what her biological mom named her. We truly believe that she is an answer to prayer. Only God could have arranged things so perfectly.

You have a miracle story, too. Because you, too, are adopted. All of us are. We are part of God's family, not because we were born into it, but because God has adopted us. Paul's letter to the Romans:

... [A]ll who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit

that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ....

Romans 8:14-17a NRSV

Let's find out together what Paul might mean when he says that we are *adopted*. In his day he was comparing Christians and Jews. He saw Jewish people as biological children of God, descended from Abraham. He saw Christians as adopted children of God, chosen to be God's sons and daughters. Paul taught that us that no one is born into Christ's family—you have to be adopted into it.

Adoptions like the ones we are most familiar with – between complete strangers -- were rare in Jesus' day. In those days when people heard the word *adoption*, they thought of the legal process by which a wealthy Roman citizen would make one of his own slaves (usually an adolescent boy) his son (and it was almost always a man who did this). Even though the circumstances were different, the significance of adoption—then and now--both to the child and to the new parents--was just as great: the child's life was changed forever -- for the better.

You see, *adult* slaves were looked down upon by Roman society. Their lives revolved around the needs of their owner and master. Slave *children* had it even worse. They were officially classified as *illegitimate*; they barely had any rights; they were routinely forced into hard labor and were often sexually and physically abused. They lived with the constant fear of separation from their siblings, with punishment, and even death. [Hebrews 2:15]ⁱ That's what it was like to be a Roman *slave*.

But the lives of Roman *children* were much different. They had all the rights and privileges of their parents and were assured of an inheritance from them. "A son had full rights to his father's name, resources, and affection."ⁱⁱ Children were expected to continue the family line and bring honor to the family name. They were just as much under their father's domination as slaves were, but their status was completely different. *Children* had an honored place in the home and in the father's heart. *Children* could call the master and head of the household, *Abba*, "Daddy."

Adoption of slaves in ancient Rome wasn't necessarily an act of altruism for the sake of a child in need. Adoption benefited the whole family. Childless adults adopted slave children so that those children would

care for them in their old age and to continue their family line. Adoption gave a childless couple a future and hope. Adoption was about fulfilling a dream.

Times have not changed that much. Adoptive parents still get at least as much out of adoption as kids do—maybe more. Many folks have said to me and Kari that Allie is blessed to have us and the boys as her family. Which brings to mind the old adage, “you can fool some of the people some of the time.” But we don’t feel that way. We feel like *we’re* the ones who have hit the jackpot. We always wanted a daughter. The boys hoped for a little sister. Allie makes our family complete.

If that’s how *we* feel, can you dare to imagine that that’s how God feels when we are adopted into God’s family through baptism? Like God’s family is finally complete! Every time a child is baptized, God has a new son or daughter, the one God always hoped for; and Jesus has a new brother or sister, the one he always wanted.

The process of adoption in ancient Rome was relatively simple, but very serious. The adopting father, the adoptive child, and at least one witness were each asked to consent to the adoption. When all agreed, an adoption was final—truly final. A parent could disown a *biological* son, but not an *adopted* one. Adoption was unconditional, irrevocable, *forever*.

It’s pretty much the same today. In Judge Masland’s courtroom Kari and I took the oath and then we each had to answer a series of questions:

- Birthplace, Date of Birth, Residence – these questions were straight forward enough.
- Is your home life happy and normal? We hesitated a little too long on that one.
- Do you realize that Alexandria will be an heir similar to any other children which have been born by you?
- Do you realize that you will continue to owe the same duty of support, love, and other parental responsibilities as to any naturally born child?
- Will you love Alexandria in all respects as if she were your natural born child?

- Do you realize that this adoption is a final act, that it cannot be undone under any circumstances and that Alexandria will be as much your child as if you were her natural parent?
- Do you still want to adopt Alexandria as your child?

If we didn't love her so much all these questions would have made us think twice about what were about to do. But we were absolutely certain that we wanted to be Allies "forever" family.

Adoption in Jesus' day permanently raised a slave to the status of a natural born child. Through adoption a slave was freed and given an entirely new name, a new family, and a new future.ⁱⁱⁱ For a slave to be adopted in those days was like being born again. Your past was officially wiped away and a new life had begun.

When my friend and his wife adopted two 7 year-old girls from Mexico, I traveled with them to serve as a witness in the court proceeding. We met the girls in a crowded orphanage in the dusty industrial city of Saltillo, Mexico. The girls weren't related, but they had become best friends in the time that they had been together, and their stories were painfully similar. Each came from a desperately poor background. Each had been placed there by relatives unable to care for them. Each had hints of abuse in her past. My friends originally intended to adopt just one girl, but when the adoption agent explained that unless both were adopted the remaining one would almost certainly end up a prostitute by the time she was 16, they changed their minds. When the girls heard the news, they were giddy. And they didn't know that they were about to go and live in the home of a surgeon in one of the wealthiest towns in New Jersey. Ten years later, as they go out to meet their friends wearing \$100 jeans and designer T-shirts emblazoned on the front with the words, "Made in Mexico," you'd never know that they once lived on a few dollars a day. They are products of their past, but through adoption they are not slaves to it.

This is the kind of life-transforming experience that Paul had in mind when he told the early Christians that they had been adopted in Christ. In Paul's mind *before we are adopted in Christ* we are poor, miserable, slaves to sin. We aren't free to live as God calls us to, and we can never rise above our status as sinners. We live as orphans in fear and anxiety, appearing to be free, but having no real security at all. We all know people like this, don't

we? They seem to have it all together and yet they are lacking peace of mind and hope.

When we are adopted in Christ, that can change. Through adoption our status is completely secure: we're no longer slaves, but God's *chosen* ones, sons and daughters of the king. [Galatians 4:7] Of all the people in the world, God has chosen *us* to be God's heirs, to share in God's blessings, to bring honor to God's name, and to continue God's royal family line.

There's an element of intentionality and choice in adoption that doesn't come with biological birth. To put it bluntly, biological children are random gifts. But every adopted child is specifically *chosen* for adoption. The adoptive parents *could* have said, "No." That's why it's such a miracle that, looking at us, knowing full well all our strengths and weaknesses and quirks, God said, "Yes" to each one of us. "*She's* the one I want." "Yeah, *he'll* be my son."

When my sons are feeling down about themselves—and we all do from time to time, don't we?—I tell them, "You know, if all the children of the world were lined up side by side, shoulder to shoulder, and I could pick any of them to take home to be my family, I'd choose you two." And then they grow silent. I know what they're thinking: which one of us would you pick first? And the tender moment is lost.

What a privilege it is to call God our *parent*. A while back a mom who adopted a boy from Kazakhstan told me about the thrill she felt when her adopted son, Daniel, first called her, "Mama." They were still in Kazakhstan awaiting adoption day in court. Lauren and Daniel were playing hide and go seek in the orphanage, with Daniel looking for Lauren. All of a sudden Daniel started calling out: "Mama!" Lauren said she'll never forget that moment, that sound.

People call me pastor. Some kids call me coach. I'm a citizen, son, and husband. But there's no title that gives me more joy than that of "Daddy." Imagine how God feels each time we pray saying, "our Father."

The change in our relationship with God -- from slaves to daughters and sons -- takes years to fully realize; so in one sense, it is gradual. At the same time, however, there is a single moment when our transformation is officially recognized by the rest of the family. That moment is Baptism.

[Galatians 3:26-29] In Baptism our adoption is finalized and God's love for us becomes part of the public record. In Baptism, God, the child (or his or her parents), and the congregation all give their blessing to a new and irrevocable relationship. And in that moment whatever our age, we become God's own forever sons and daughters. Nothing and no one can take that away from us. No matter what we do. No matter what or who we become.

At our Baptism we are born again into a new family and a new life. It's the day God makes an awesome and permanent promise to provide for us, to protect us, and nurture us all the way from this life to the next—at any cost – even at the cost of God's only natural born son.

It's almost impossible for us to imagine the love and courage it takes God to make that promise on our behalf. R.T. Kendall helps us picture it when he writes:

A few years ago my wife and I witnessed the adoption of a child in a Fort Lauderdale, Florida, courtroom. We listened to the judge as he spoke to the two adoptive parents in the gravest tones. The judge looked each parent straight in the eye and said, 'Before I sign my name to this document, I need to know that you realize what you are about to do. If I sign my name to this document, it means this child is yours, *legally* yours, as though he were your [biological] son. There is no guarantee how he will turn out. He may disappoint you. [He may embarrass you.] He may turn to drugs as a teenager. He may develop a serious illness and you will be responsible to care for him. If I sign my name to this document, this child is yours from this day forward.... Once I sign, you cannot turn him back.... Do you understand this?' The parents did not hesitate to answer. 'We understand,' they responded. 'Then it is your will that you become parents of this child?' The judge asked. 'It is,' they replied. And the judge signed the order.

[Then] he got off his seat and walked around to the two parents [and the child] and congratulated them. Every eye was filled with tears.

It was only then that the judge revealed that he too had been adopted as a child.^{iv}

“See what love the father has for us that we should be called children of God, and that is what we are.” [1 John 3:1] In Baptism we’re all adopted – forever chosen, forever free, forever *God’s family*. Amen.

ⁱ Sarah Julien and Melanie Murray, "Coming Home: Adoption in Ephesians and Galatians," *Quodlibet Journal* Volume 5, no. 2-3 (July 2003). <http://www.Quodlibet.net>

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*. 114. (As quoted in an on-line source).

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