

“We are all adopted”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Ephesians 1:3-7 and Romans 8:12-17*

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In 2004, an earthquake in the Indian Ocean triggered massive tsunamis throughout South Asia and the eastern coast of Africa.

That day, a family of hippos was playing in the Sabaki River in Eastern Kenya. When the tsunami hit, the hippos were swept out to sea. Only one survived, a baby. He was washed ashore, wet, scared, and tired. He didn't know where he was, and he couldn't find his mother. Some locals found the baby and took him to a nature reserve, where he was given the name of Owen. He was very lonely. He missed his mommy. And then he saw something. Something large like his mommy with a domed back. Something brownish gray like his mommy. So “he staggered over and snuggled next to it,” falling into a deep sleep. When he woke, he found that he was nestled up with a 130-year-old giant male tortoise named Mzee. But the fact that he was a tortoise, and a male, didn't seem to bother Owen, who had decided Mzee was going to be his mommy. For the next two years, Owen never left Mzee's side. They slept together, swam together, and ate together. Whenever Mzee would get up to walk—very slowly, mind you—Owen would follow, right behind.

The story was later turned into a children's book called *A Mama for Owen*.

I think we're a lot like Owen. That is, if you don't mind being compared to a hippo!

We're all orphans of one kind or another. Perhaps we feel abandoned by our changing culture. Perhaps we went off to war, and came home feeling like a stranger. Maybe we lost our family—through abuse or addiction or illness or just the slow distancing of time. Maybe we were orphaned by racial and economic systems that dehumanized and oppressed us. Perhaps we feel alone—because of how we think or whom we love. Maybe we just wish we had a friend. Maybe we just wish we could know for sure that God's out there and loves us.

We're all scared little hippos, searching, wanting to belong somewhere, to someone.

In Paul's time, when he writes this letter to the church in Rome, if a child lost their parents or their city (say, because of plague or war or poverty), that child was often sold into slavery. It was a dangerous thing in ancient Rome to be on your own. And it's a dangerous thing still.

I think that's why a sense of belonging is often compared to a sense of safety. I remember the first time, outside of family and church, that I experienced that feeling. It was in the woods, in a grove of trees near my house, and a creek bed of polished stones, clay walls, and clear, flowing water. I felt happy. There, in the birdsong and the light through the leaves, I felt like the world

finally made sense. Speech impediments didn't matter here. Neither did bullies or loneliness. Here, everything was connected. Everything was God and love and me.

Paul describes that feeling as adoption, and not just a feeling but a state of being.

Paul says that God has found us, orphans all, and claimed us as God's children. We get to call God *Abba*, the Aramaic word used by children for their father: "Daddy." An intimate word, used by Jesus, who is now our brother.

Though Paul doesn't use the word *Trinity*, he does speak of God the Father, and Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is a mystery none of us can comprehend. But at its root is a relationship. It's the idea that we can't talk about God without talking about love. Love is always dynamic, always in motion, never static. To be love, it has to be shared. It has to be given away. And thus the Trinity tells us that God is a relational being, and within God, there is not just one, but three. And between these three is a constant state of giving and receiving, a mutual sharing of love, passed between Creator, Savior, and Spirit. It's a divine family.

And God, Paul says, has adopted us into this family. We get to be a part of it. God has chosen to share that love outside of God's self and give it to the world, to us. In Christ, God proclaimed us God's children. God adopted us.

Paul didn't have to use this language of adoption. He could have talked about new birth, as he does elsewhere. But throughout his letters is this persistent language about adoption—the idea that, though we were lost, God found us, loved us, and called us co-heirs with Christ. Think about the power of that statement.

God gives us a place to belong. The best place!

In Roman society, when a child was adopted, that child had the same legal rights and same inheritance as biological children. They were saved from a life of slavery and fear. And now Paul tells us that we are given the same rights and inheritance as Christ himself, God's only Son.

What would this mean for your life? Right now, today? How would this change how you see yourself, how you see others around you? How would it change how you spend your time? Maybe you'd take a chance on that dream you've been bottling up inside for so long. Maybe you'd tell someone that you love them, or give a hug to someone hurting, or stand up for someone being treated as anything other than an equal child of God.

Paul's concept of adoption changes everything. It means everything that's been holding you back every day of your life is a lie. You are a daughter of God. You are a son of God.

As many of you know, Jenna and I are in the adoption process: we are very excited! Some of you are adoptive parents or were yourselves adopted. And we need to talk about that more. When was the last time you heard a sermon about adoption?

The question, though, is how do we go from God's adoption of us to human adoption?

Run a Google search, and you'll find lots of Christian articles encouraging people to adopt. Nothing wrong there. Except most of these articles compare God's adoption of us to a parent's adoption of a child. And I tend to get worried when people compare themselves to God. It's no small wonder that these are often the same people who claim to speak for God when a hurricane hits, or when someone happens to love differently.

Now as a good Presbyterian and Calvinist, thoroughly saturated in the awareness of my own depravity [*said humorously*], I cannot let this stand. We are not God in this scenario of adoption. We're not the heroes who run in to save to the day.

We are the ones in the burning building. We're the ones who get rescued. We are the adopted, not the adopters.

Any other theology makes human adoption reek of saviorism, ignores complicity with root causes such as poverty, and degrades the birth family that courageously chose to place their child for adoption and endure a trauma few of us can fathom.

So what does divine adoption mean for human adoption? It means two things:

- (1) If God has created this diverse, crazy adoptive family, we have to throw out all our assumptions about what it means to be family and embrace a new openness that transcends race, sexuality, gender identity, and all the ways we define and confine each other. It means chosen families, birth families, foster families, friends, church, justice movements, schools, even the saints in heaven. Anything where we are adopted by love.
- (2) It means joyous, out-of-this-world gratitude, which makes us want to share the love we have been given. Maybe there's some kind of obligation between biological parents and children. But there's no obligation to adopt. We didn't earn that love. It was just given to us. And so we can't demand that anyone else earn that love either. We have to be as generous with our love as God was with us.

This is what adoption has to teach us.

When Jenna and I adopt, God will create in that moment a love that will bind us, child, and birth family together, and through that love, and that openness, God will adopt us all. Paul doesn't say that it will be easy. In fact, he speaks of struggle and suffering. But at last Jenna and I will be in a place where we belong. It'll be like walking into that copse of trees when I was child. It'll be like coming home.

We will know that we have been adopted into something amazing. A family.

So today, my encouragement to you is to see yourself as adopted.

You don't have to be afraid anymore. You have a place where you belong, and a Person to whom you belong.

In the end, all of us are just little hippos resting our heads on the back of an ancient Tortoise, an unexpected Mommy. **Amen.**