

PART OF THE FAMILY

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Romans 8:14-17

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Corona del Mar Community Church, Congregational

A few weeks before my mom married Gene Scifres, he invited her and her 8-year-old daughter (that would be me) to my first-ever family reunion. Apparently, he and his cousins had been gathering in late June every year at his Uncle Raymond's lake house for a full day of swimming, water skiing, and (of course) eating. I was excited to attend one of these mysterious family reunions that I heard about in books, but had never experienced. Knowing I would be meeting a bunch of people I'd never seen before, I expected to feel shy and left out. But from the minute I walked in the doors of Uncle Raymond's house, I was welcomed with wide open arms, abundant hugs, and – surprise of surprises – an invitation to go first in the food line when lunch time rolled around. At those family reunions, the grandchildren are served first. Even before Mom & Dad married, I was immediately adopted in as one of the grandchildren.

This is the kind of family reunion Paul envisioned as he led and helped build the early Christian community. He knew what it was like to be an outsider in this strange new community of faith; after all, when Paul first became a Christian, most of Jesus' followers were terrified of him and his violent past as a persecutor of Jesus' followers. Paul had to gain their trust and prove himself worthy of the leadership to which Christ had called him. But by the time Paul wrote the letter to the Roman church, from which today's scripture comes, Paul was an insider--accepted and admired as a strong and faithful Christian leader. But, Paul had not yet met the Christians of Rome when he set sail to visit them. So, he prepared the way by writing them this lengthy letter we call "Romans," full of theology and guidance, as wise today as it was then.

Today's reading provides a guiding tenet to what life in the Spirit is intended to be for us
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in the church. We are all adopted by God, part of the family of Christ. The Spirit frees us to be family with God. The Spirit connects us to Christ as our brother, adopting us into Christ's family. And, the Spirit connects us to one another, for together in the Spirit, we are all children of God, all part of the family.

This would not have been new information to the Roman church, who already had a decade-long, faithful history as followers of Christ. And yet, Paul offers these images of adoption and family because the Roman church was struggling to be a unified family. The Roman church was more like a group of churches in that large, populous city – meeting in homes and local synagogues. Even though the Roman church was following the new teachings of Peter and Paul that all were welcome in the family of God – Gentile and Jew alike -- word around the region was that they were having disagreements about how to be a family: what hierarchy should guide them, who was supposed to be in charge, how rigid were the rules, and what traditions had to be upheld. And all these disagreements and debates were threatening their unity as a family of God. And so, Paul encourages them not to fall back into that spirit of slavery to hierarchies, rigid rules, and traditions, but rather to welcome the spirit of freedom given to us by God's Spirit.

Times haven't changed much in 2000 years. Christians meet in various homes and buildings, often judging other Christian communities as somehow less or more, sometimes viewing ourselves as somehow better or worse than other Christian communities. Perhaps even more sorrowful is the way in which Christians within the same community fall back into that spirit of slavery and start judging one another and dividing within our own Christian community. Like Paul, I've seen some form of this in every church I've ever served, and it always grieves my heart. But I also understand where it comes from and why division so easily deceives us and

convinces us that our judgments are right and just.

Church members can divide the family in many ways, but the three reasons that were dividing Roman Christians and still divide us some 2000 years later sound so – well - reasonable. We lean on hierarchies and rigid rules and traditions, so that we know what to expect. It's not so scary that way. Hierarchies keep people in their place, rigid rules prevent new ideas from taking hold, and traditions help us hold on to the past rather than moving into God's future. Okay, maybe these hierarchies, rules, and traditions aren't so reasonable after all. The Spirit came to free us from being stuck in some "proper place." The Spirit frees us from rules that divide us from one another and separate us from God. The Spirit blows through us even now, to breathe new ideas and new life into our lives and our churches. Whenever we start leaning on hierarchies or resisting change in favor of rigidity or holding on to tradition rather than God, we are falling back into that very spirit of slavery from which the Spirit has freed us.

Paul warns us that if we live by the flesh in this spirit of slavery, we will die. But, ah, that need not be our fate. Paul writes: "You have received a spirit of adoption! ***We are children of God.***" Not just one or two of us, not just the long-time faithful members, not just the newest Christians, not just the Jews, not just the Gentiles – but all of us who are led by the Spirit are children of God. We are all part of the family.

Here at Community Church, we try to live and embody this freedom of the Spirit with our covenanting system, so that all who want to be part of the family are part of the family. Want to join the church? Just write it on a piece of paper or send an email: "I will be part of this church family." Feeling called to serve in ministry or help on a Board of committee? Just write it on a piece of paper or talk to a Deacon or send an email: "I'm feeling called to serve in this way. I

want to help out in that way.” That’s the way we do things here.

We want to follow the Spirit’s guidance by living this freedom of adoption into God’s family. But then the spirit of slavery creeps back in. We start getting worried that we might have to share a leadership role, or someone might bring ideas we’re not comfortable with.

Hierarchy starts tempting us. “Hey, that person shouldn’t be in leadership yet. They haven’t earned the right. They need to work their way up to that role.” That a spirit of slavery, whispering in our ears. Hierarchy hinders our unity, hinders the Spirit’s freedom. But, the Spirit is ready for this, offering an antidote to those hierarchical whisperings: humility. Humility honors everyone, whereas hierarchy judges and hinders the Spirit from freeing and unifying us. But Spirit is stronger, ready to strengthen and support us if only we continue to trust in the Spirit and the Spirit’s adoption of *all* of us into this family of God.

So next time hierarchical thoughts start creeping in and you start thinking, “Hey, that person shouldn’t be in leadership yet,” take a deep breath and remember humility, for humility helps us to honor everyone. Then you can say to those thoughts, “Begone! Get thee behind me! We’re children of the Spirit here, freely adopted and inclusive of everyone!” If you can’t find the words, lean on humility and pray for the Spirit to do the work for you. Let the Spirit bring down the walls of hierarchy and thoughts of “earning the right” to serve and lead in the church, just as the Spirit brought down those walls of Jericho so long ago. Tear down those walls that divide, so we can honor everyone as part of the family, as the Spirit honors and includes every one of us.

We want to follow the Spirit’s guidance by living this freedom of adoption. But then the spirit of slavery creeps back in. We start getting worried that new ideas might bring change we won’t like. And so, we start clinging to rules and regulations and leaning on “the way we’ve

always done it before.”

Rigidity tempts us. “Hey, that’s not the way we used to do it. That new idea doesn’t follow the rules. They can’t try that new thing. Who gave them permission?” That’s a spirit of slavery, rigidity whispering in our ears. Rigidity restricts us. Rigidity restricts the Spirit’s freedom to unify us. Rigidity divides us with rules that separate us from one another. But, the Spirit is ready for this, offering an antidote to those rigidity whisperings: Relax. Relaxing relieves our fears, allows us to take a deep breath and actually breathe in the Spirit’s presence. When rigidity tries to restrict the Spirit from freeing us, the Spirit is ready to relax and relieve our fears, if only we continue to trust in the Spirit and the Spirit’s adoption of all of us into this family of God.

When rigidity comes calling and you find yourself afraid that a new idea might not work or might bring change that frightens you, remember that fear is just another spirit of slavery, blocking the Holy Spirit from freeing us for full adoption into the family. When you hear yourself saying what we called in seminary the seven last words of the church, “We’ve never done it that way before,” take a deep breath and relax. You’re not the first to say it, and you won’t be the last. If I put a dollar into the offering plate today for every time I’ve heard that phrase, I could probably singlehandedly solve our church’s budget deficit. But in seminary, we called those the “seven last words of the church,” because they’re the phrases church leaders use as their churches die. Those phrases are reflections of the very fear that Paul was already hearing about amongst the Roman followers, many of whom had been present when the Spirit came upon them at Pentecost and changed everything. Yet, fear of this new way of including both Gentiles and Jews was creeping in. Fear of change is just another way in which we fall back into a spirit

of slavery. So, the Spirit invites us to relax and enjoy the freedom to listen as the Spirit blows through us with new ideas, new opportunities to serve, and new ways of being the church together and serving more effectively for a changing world.

“What about tradition? Isn’t that a good thing,” you might be wondering. I so, you wouldn’t be the first. Tevye sang of it so poignantly in *Fiddler on the Roof*, right before everything in his little Russian town began to change, teaching him that perhaps faith and love are the only traditions that we really have to hold on to anyway. Still, we cling to other traditions because they make us feel safe. Celebrate the birthday the same way every year, and we can pretend that death won’t one day be a reality for every person we love. Make the church traditions identical to the ones you grew up with, and perhaps we can ignore the fact that churches are smaller and less significant than they’ve ever been in the history of American society. Holding onto traditions just for the sake of tradition not only can blind us to the world around us, but can also trap us in yet another spirit of slavery. Enslaved to our traditions, we might still refuse seating to people of color on Sunday mornings or close the pulpit to a woman’s voice or insist that every word of the Bible is literally true. Traditions like this trample us and divide us from one another. But, the Spirit is ready for this, strong enough to stand and offer an antidote to traditions that trample and divide us: trust. Trust leans on the Spirit, whereas tradition leans on our past. But Spirit is stronger than all our fears, ready to breathe new life into us and nourish and strengthen us for whatever changes lie ahead, if only we can trust in the Spirit and the Spirit’s adoption of *all* of us into this family of God.

So next time nostalgia for the past and yearning for tradition starts causing you to wring your hands and worry, “Hey, that isn’t our tradition. If we move too far away, I’m afraid we’ll

get lost,” pause and invite Spirit to guide your thoughts. Let trust lead the way. Trust that Spirit is right here, as steadfast as waves upon the shore.

Trying to cling to the past in the name of “tradition” is like trying to resist waves as they wash and change the beach every day. So, the Spirit invites us to trust and enjoy the freedom that we don’t have to be in charge. God’s got this. Trusting the Spirit’s power, we discover that the Spirit is the continuous crashing of waves upon the shore, a tradition of God’s constant faithfulness, always with us, always for us. Trusting God frees us to be a family again, unified and strong, not because of anything we’re doing, but because we’re letting God’s Spirit guide us.

Hierarchy, Rigidity, and Tradition – these three would weaken us, preventing us from being the full family we can be and become. These “HRT” hormones seriously need replacement in the form of Humility, Relaxation, and Trust. Hierarchy, Rigidity, and Tradition tempt us to trust fear instead of trusting Spirit, enslaving us instead of freeing us. But humbling ourselves, relaxing into Spirit, and trusting the Spirit turns all that around, freeing us to embrace God’s adoption and be the family of God we are meant to be. We can be this family, like a family that accepts a little girl they’ve never met as their grandchild and then invites the youngest and smallest people in the room to be served first and most abundantly at the buffet table. This is what it is to be the family of God. Wouldn’t you like to be part of that family? Then come to the table, join the feast, for we are all invited and welcome to be part of the family here.

PRAYER

Abba, Father, Mother of us all, Friend, Companion, Creator of us all, thank you for adopting us as your children, making us your family. Please bind us together through the power of your Holy Spirit. Humble us to remember that you are in charge, not us. Breathe into our troubled souls so that we can relax and lean on you, rather than ourselves. Strengthen our faith, so that we can truly trust you and follow where you lead. Help us celebrate your constant presence and power as the only power we will ever need. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

As you feel led, I invite you to join me in praying the Lord's Prayer.

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, and the power,
and the glory forever. Amen.
Amen.