

“One of the Family”
Romans 8:12-25; Psalm 103:1-13

An Englishman named Nicholas Cresswell was visiting America in October 1776, less than four months after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Noting the outspoken patriotism of American Presbyterians, he wrote in his diary: “The Presbyterian clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of the Congress...I am convinced that if they establish their independence that [Presbyterianism] will be the established religion on this continent.”

Well, freedom came, but not Presbyterianism. Presbyterianism influence moderated because of two primary factors. First, because Presbyterians believed then, as we do now, that freedom meant freedom. Being free gives one the right and opportunity to choose one’s form of religious faith, or even none at all. And second, the Presbyterian demand for an educated clergy could not keep up with western expansion and caused entire pastorless congregations to become Baptist or Methodist.

But at the time of the American Revolution, it can be argued that Presbyterianism was the most influential form of Christianity among the freedom seeking colonists. Of the fifty-six signers of the Declaration of Independence, twelve were members of or had close ties to the Presbyterian Church. The only clergyman to sign the Declaration, John Witherspoon, was president of the Presbyterian school known as the College of New Jersey, later to be called Princeton University. The other eleven Presbyterians ranged from the renowned Philadelphia doctor, Benjamin Rush, to farmer John Hart of New Jersey.

Most of these men were devoted to the Church, their belief in freedom having grown out of their Christian faith. A member of the Hopewell, New Jersey Presbyterian Church for thirty-four years, John Hart was known as “Honest John.”

Richard Stockton was described by a minister as not being “ashamed of the gospel of Christ. Nor could the ridicule of licentious wits, nor the example of vice in power, tempt him to disguise the profession of it or to decline from the practice of its virtues.”

Now, it is typical that around the Fourth of July we resurrect these icons of faith and freedom. As Americans, and Presbyterians, we are filled with pride to be associated with men of such character and patriotism. We recall how they boldly stepped forward to challenge England’s rule. But this is where we usually conclude our memories, our yearly commendation of that glorious signing on July the 4th, 1776. Noting the outspoken faith and patriotism of these Presbyterians, we seldom venture into the cost of their virtues. But to refrain from such causes us to miss important elements of their faith journeys.

For instance, the aforementioned Richard Stockton was a lawyer whose family had come to America in 1670. Also a trustee at the future Princeton University, Congress sent him to inspect the Continental troops at Saratoga. While gone, the British raided his luxurious estate. Burning his papers and library, they confiscated all his livestock. Hiding in the home of a friend, Stockton was betrayed by Loyalists and jailed in New York City. Poorly fed and beaten, Congress eventually negotiated his release. But not before his health was ruined and his fortune destroyed. In 1781, before the end of the war, he died at the age of fifty.

In 1776, the British also raided the vast holdings of “Honest John” Hart. Sending his thirteen children fleeing, Hart remained by the bedside of his ill wife. When the soldiers arrived at his front door, he fled into the woods. Trying in vain for months to find him, the British finally gave up. Hart returned to discover his wife dead and his farm devastated. Though reunited with his children, the months of hiding in the forest and caves deteriorated his health to the point that he too died before the war ended, being laid to rest in 1780.

Philip Livingston sold part of his estate to maintain the war effort. George Taylor used his foundry to sell the Continental Army ammunition at such a bargain price he severely damaged his finances. James Wilson, a Pennsylvania lawyer, found an enraged mob at his Philadelphia home. And these were his fellow patriots who physically attacked him, angered by inflation and food shortages.

Now, my point is this: Today, we look back with admiration on these men who stood up for what was good and right. They were Presbyterians of great Christian faith and character. But those acts of Christian courage also produced devastating personal consequences. If we could transport ourselves back and place ourselves in the position of being their spouses or children, we would recognize that their actions severely harmed our lives. Fortunes lost. Homes and farms burned. Hunted as criminals. Lost friends. Interrupted educations. Postponed marriages. We think what they did was great, and it was. But for those close to them, and for them, it was disastrous.

And that is the first point I want to make this morning. In Paul’s letter to the Romans, he writes: “For all 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...”

Throughout our lives, every one of us will experience tragedy, unfair consequences, unhappy circumstances foisted onto us by elements or people beyond our control. Sometimes, like these patriotic Presbyterians, they will be negative circumstances brought about by doing what is right and good. Usually, they are situations in which we are not entirely blameless, but we surely did not deserve these consequences.

And in the midst of attempting to understand how this could happen to us, to discover some logic within something so perplexing, we end up believing God must be punishing us. With no rational explanation at hand, we are led to the mystical, the spiritual, the One who knows all, sees all, and therefore plans all. Conjuring a street definition of predestination, we conclude that God must have willed our present situation. And instead of our Savior, God becomes our tormentor.

Now, these conclusions usually do not present themselves when our lives are moving on an even keel, only periodically swayed by life’s multitude of bumps. But when the core of our existence is shredded, the death of a spouse, financial decimation, divorce, job loss, any occurrence that sweeps away the underpinning of our very existence, we seek to understand what went wrong. And when the answers are so cloudy, so illogical, or even nonsensical, we turn to the very heart of our belief system to find an omnipotent God. And we think that somehow, some way, we must have angered God, must have made God an enemy instead of friend.

Golda Meir, a pillar of strength as prime minister during the State of Israel's formative years once said, "Let me tell you one thing I have against Moses. He took us forty years into the desert in order to bring us to the one place in the Middle East that has no oil!"

Sometimes we feel like we have been faithfully following God for forty years in the desert of life, and all of a sudden the oil of happiness is everywhere but on our little piece of existence.

But notice what Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God."

Let me ask you a question.

Would your parents ever intentionally hurt you?

Would you ever become angry enough with your child that you would give him a disease that would make him die?

Would you purposely place your daughter in a devastating divorce?

Would you intentionally place your child in a position to fail?

Would you thrust your mother aside when she needed your help?

The scripture says we are God's children. If we would not intentionally harm our children or parents, I think we can be safe in declaring neither will God. Now, this does not mean God protects us from the consequences of our sin. Remember when your mother told you not to touch the hot stove, but you just had to see for yourself how hot it was? Well, your mother couldn't prevent your blistered fingers. And in a world in which we enjoy free will, we, too discover unpleasant consequences of our disobedient actions. And, even worse, living in an integrated universe, we sometimes suffer because of the sin of others.

But in the midst of all this, it is essential to grasp that God does not will us harm, does not seek ways to punish us, to hurt us. Since the first day Adam and Eve were shoved out of the Garden of Eden, humanity has experienced the tentative nature of living, the joy and unfairness of a day to day existence, and the devastation of life's traumas. But when these occur, God is not punishing us, seeking a way to teach us a lesson, displaying his anger toward us. God loves us. We are God's children. God does not intentionally hurt us.

An angel appeared at a faculty meeting and told the dean that as a reward for his unselfish and exemplary behavior, the Lord would give him the choice of infinite wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the dean selected infinite wisdom.

"Done!" said the angel, and disappeared in a cloud of smoke and a bolt of lightning.

All academic heads turned toward the dean, who sat surrounded by a faint halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispered, "Say something."

The dean sighed and replied, "I should have taken the money."

We may sometimes wish we had chosen differently. But God is not looking to hurt us physically or spiritually.

"For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience."

Theological visions of eternal life are not as widely discussed in American Christianity as they once were. This is because a middle class American now experiences heaven on earth. Computers, airplanes, antibiotics, air conditioning, year round fresh fruits and vegetables, our great grandparents would view this as the return of the Garden of Eden.

And yet, when tragedy strikes, we strain to find a light at the end of the tunnel. No luxury car or modern medicine can alleviate the pain and emptiness we encounter.

This passage reminds us that better days are ahead. Our God does not abandon us. For continued life here on earth, forgiveness and a new beginning await us. And if the door of our earthly life is closing, we are assured that a loving, gracious God waits to receive us on the other side.

The Christian story is called the “good news” because it carries a message of hope. Our God does not wish us ill. He does not seek to harm us. Rather, God desires, wants to give us a new life, an existence filled with love, and hope. We live in hope because we know our heavenly Father seeks to save us both here, and in the world to come.

Many of you will remember Lewis Grizzard, the popular Southern humorist who wrote several books and was well known for his comedy routines. Well, his personal life was no less chaotic than his night club act. Married numerous times, he suffered through several messy divorces that provided grist for his humor. One time he joked, “Instead of getting married again, I’m going to find a woman I don’t like and give her a house.”

Difficult times can make it easy to believe God does not like us and while divorcing himself from us is just trying to pacify us with a few crumbs here and there, maybe even a house. But the scripture tells us God never stops loving us, never ceases wanting us to spiritually prosper. It is God’s love that is present now, and for all eternity.

“One of the Family”

We are a part of God’s family. In fact, the Bible describes us as God’s children. When calling on God, Paul uses the term “Abba.” Abba is the Aramaic word for father. Employed by Jesus when he called to God, its connotation carries elements of love, affection, and devotion. Some translators believe our term “Daddy” is a more appropriate translation.

Paul’s intent is to relate how much God loves us, cares for us, how desirous God is to aid our earthly journey. God does not attempt to harm us. Our knowledge of this truth is one of the reasons we live in hope.

This morning, as we struggle to understand a world often filled with death and despair, tragedy and trauma, let us remember that Abba, Our Father, “Daddy” does not attempt to do us harm. We are God’s children. And the love and joy we seek for our own family, God desires for you and me.

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