

***The Children of God***  
Eighth Sunday After Trinity  
(From the Epistle: *Romans viii. 12.*)

King James Version (KJV):

*12. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. 13. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. 14. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. 15. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. 16. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: 17. And if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.*

New International Version (NIV):

*12 Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation--but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. 15 For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba," Father." 16 The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. 17 Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.*

This unique term -- "children of God" -- (vs. 16b) is of great importance. To make the claim of being a child of specific parentage, after all, brings with it, a host of implications: rights of inheritance; a direct genetic connection, with the likelihood of many shared characteristics which affirm our identity; a comforting sense (if conditions are favorable) of protection, nurture, encouragement, and support. On the contrary, to be unable to claim and embrace specific parents leave us in a precarious and vulnerable state. To whom will we attach ourselves? What sense of heritage will we have? To whom can we go, if all else fails, for a shelter in the storms of life?

Riding my transit bus in Bangor, Maine, are many couples in which one member is a step-parent. Sometimes they are very poor step-parents, but in several special cases they are doing their very best to embrace children which are not biologically theirs (although sadly, far more often than not, the couples remain unmarried). I myself was a step-parent to my two beloved step-children. I think of them, for all intents and purposes, as much *my* children as my own two biological children. Linda and I have, in essence, adopted each other's kids, and rejoice in all four of them. We live in an age where this sort of arrangement has become, needless to say, commonplace.

God Himself has only one "natural" Offspring, as it were: His Son, Jesus Christ. As we repeat every Sunday in the Nicene Creed: "I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God...[who] was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary..." Jesus, as the Son of

God, possesses all of the characteristics of God in a unique way that can never be duplicated by any other.

Today's Epistle presents to the believer a fascinating and extraordinarily comforting truth. It specifically instructs us as to how we can irrefutably and certainly assure both ourselves, and proclaim to the whole universe, that we --yes, we!-- are actually *children of God*. Please note how the Apostle unfolds this blessed truth.

First, he tells us, *For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God* (14). So, am I *led by the Spirit*? Am I constantly, invisibly, but relentlessly and persistently, directed by His Spirit? How do I evidence this? By the existence of supernatural occurrences! Does this Shepherding Spirit lead me to do things, say things, attempt things, think things, fill me with unprecedented graces (see, e.g., Galatians 5:22 ff.), make me entirely new (2 Corinthians 5:17), busily transform me into the person I have always desired to be, provide me power in prayer..., i.e., prove Himself to me in countless ways? These are only a few of the implications of being *led by the Spirit*.

Secondly, says Paul, *...ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father* (15). Without Christ we were like poor, disinherited, lost, rejected, abused, and maligned children, all of this being the consequence of sin, for sin separates us from God our Creator, in whose image we are fashioned (Genesis 1:26,27), the Source of all that is good, right, and beautiful (Romans 6:23a, Isaiah 59:2). But repentance and baptism grant us the gift of God's Spirit (Acts 2:38), which not only banishes *fear*, but also allows us to *cry, Abba* [a Hebrew term of endearment], *Father* (which, in so many words, means we are calling God... "Daddy!"), like delighted little children greeting their father when he arrives home after work).

Thirdly, and most awesomely, *The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God* (16), meaning that our claim to sonship --to the parentage of God by adoption-- is confirmed, witnessed, certified, sworn to, backed up, by none other than God Himself! If our claim is true and not false, based upon genuine repentance and a humble reception of God's gift of salvation through Christ, then the Spirit Himself will lend His imprimatur to us. He will say, "This little one --My child-- is the real thing!"

And lastly, the Apostle makes this amazing statement: *And if [we are] children [of God], then [we are] heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ...* (17a). *Heirs!!* This is a promise of God whose depths will take an eternity to plumb...

Now I've saved for the very last of the sermon the latter portion of this verse of Scripture (17), because I think it is extremely significant. It is not at all politically correct, in terms of modern American standards, because it injects a note of experience that is generally very far

from most of us: *...if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together* (17b). St. Paul appears to be saying here that *suffering with him* is a chief characteristic that causes God's children to be able to make a clear, distinct --and virtually inherited-- claim of absolute identity with our Heavenly Parent. It is this matter of *suffering with Him*. This, among all that characterized God as He intersected with this world through His Son, sums up His experience: it is one of *suffering*. It was His legacy from the day He arrived, until the day He departed. It is a story of delayed joy --the setting aside of self-satisfaction, of pleasure, of just and valid rights to honor, worship, dignity, and respect, of placing all of one's hopes and dreams on hold, as it were-- for the purpose of redeeming the world:

*Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)*

We do not dare to claim to be God's children without the ability to at least begin to display this most important of filial characteristics! Without *suffering with Him*, we cannot expect to *share in His glory*. To do so would be pure presumption, laying claims to being part of a family to which we bear no resemblance, neither to the Parent nor to His other children!

*Suffering itself* is not the key; it must be *suffering with him*. Human suffering, whether in the context of our families or marriages, our employment, or personal tragedy, illness, or disaster, is the common experience of all, rich and poor, Christian and non-Christian, alike. But *suffering with him* means the transformation of all our suffering into something holy, redemptive, healing, constructive, and ultimately positive --even noble and precious-- because it is endured for His sake who has allowed it for that highest of ends: to be *made into His likeness* (2 Corinthians 3:18). And for some of us, such suffering may even take the particular form of persecution, or martyrdom, and great affliction for the sake of Christ and His Gospel.

Alas, this sort of thing often seems far from us!

Do we dare to pray that God would privilege us to *suffer with Him*, that we might with complete assurance walk in all of the wonder that is meant when we proclaim to the world: "I am a child of God?"

Help us, Lord.

*In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.*