

HEIRS OF FAITH – CHILDREN OF FREEDOM

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University Congregational Church

September 12, 2010

Reading: Galatians 4: 1-7

This is what I mean: so long as the heir is a minor, he is no better off than a slave, even though the whole estate is his; he is under guardians and trustees until the date fixed by his father. And so it was with us. During our minority we were slaves to the elemental spirits of the universe, but when the term was completed, God sent his own Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to purchase freedom for the subjects of the law, in order that we might attain the status of sons.

I love the old story about the family that had gone to bed. The master bedroom was downstairs and the children's bedrooms were up-stairs. In the wee hours of the morning a fierce thunderstorm broke out. Lightning flashed brilliantly. The thunder roared and shook the house. Pictures on the wall shook. The gale threw itself against the walls and howled down the chimney.

After ten minutes of relentless tempest the seven-year-old boy yelled out, "I want to go downstairs and sleep with daddy." The mother replied, "You're OK. God is with you." At that instant lightning smashed the electric transformer on the corner of the house and the power went out.

The little boy cried, "Fine, you come up here and sleep with God. I want to sleep with daddy."

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote about the relationship of children to their father as analogous to our relationship with God. To fully appreciate the point he was trying to make let us consider for a moment the cultural background against which Paul was writing. Paul was clearly speaking about children who grew up in homes of wealth. He states that they will one day be heirs, suggesting there is some

kind of substantial estate that they will come into one day. Paul was not writing about children of poverty or about children of slaves. However, while they were in their minority the children of wealth lived something like a slave.

Roman law established *patria potestas*, the absolute power of the father, not only over his children but grandchildren. This power included the father's decision whether or not to accept a newborn or have that baby set outside to die of exposure. This decision could be decided on by gender, size of the child, size of the family, legitimacy, or deformity. As long as the father was alive his wealth and estate remained within his domain. The marriage of any of his children required his consent. *Paterfamilias* transferred the power of a woman from her father to the father of her husband. A father had the legal right to execute his daughter or daughter-in-law on the spot should she be caught in the act of adultery.

Children were considered by Plato and Aristotle to be in the same category as women, slaves, and animals. They considered children to be weak and mentally incompetent.

In Greece children remained under the primary care of their mothers. At age seven the boys left home for school. In Sparta they were trained especially in the martial arts and would expect to serve in the army, which became increasingly rigid as they aged. Girls received some education and like the boys piety, citizenship, and respect were emphasized. Roman children were also expected to be loyal citizens and working class children were apprenticed to master crafts or tradesmen. Children of

privilege or unusual gifts were given formal education at age 12. This included music, astronomy, philosophy, mathematics, natural sciences, and rhetoric.¹

The oldest son would be the recipient of the father's wealth, a custom called primogeniture. But as I suggested earlier, the inheritance would not be realized until the father's death was imminent. As was often the case, the oldest son would likely be a mature adult before he would enjoy his full liberty and legacy.

Many of these historic and cultural practices were quite evident through the 19th century in many nations from Italy to Great Britain. Indeed, many are still practiced to one degree or another, including these United States. As a minister I have often witnessed children or grandchildren speak of their parents' last will and testament and the family feud begins before the casket is sealed.

With the question of endowment and property is the entangled issue of childhood. What does it mean, not only to inherit the gold watch, photo albums, stocks and bonds; but also to receive the lineage of DNA, personality characteristics and idiosyncrasies? I had the strange experience a year ago attending a family event. I went to the restroom and washed my hands. When I looked into the mirror I saw my grandfather's face. It was a little surprising and wonderful at the same time.

My experience tells me that whether you are a child of the 8th century Before the Common Era or a child of this 21st century, you want nothing more than the love and attention of your parents. Yes, property or financial inheritance might be a nice

¹ Elise P. Garrison and Susanna Elm, "Ancient Greece and Rome," *Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*, 2008; <http://faqs.org/childhood/A-Ar-Greece-and-Rome.html>. Electronic, downloaded 9/9/2010.

thing to receive. But it means nothing if we secretly doubt that we were ever cherished by our mothers and fathers.

I believe that is true with our religious identity as well. Regardless of one's religious affiliation, we wonder if we are dearly the children of God. Yes, we go to services regularly, tithe to our church, serve on committees, contribute time and money to charities, and engage in a daily discipline of prayer and scripture. But do we feel deeply connected to the love of God that guides us through the joys and sorrows of life? Before we are Christians, or Jews, or Muslims we stand before God as a child and if our faith means anything it ought to be that source in our life that invites us to the full inheritance of God's compassion. Paul wrote to the Romans (8: 38-39):

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

As Christians, this is the legacy that is handed down to us. I think it is more than cultural, even for those who have left the church. The reality of God or just the possibility of God is deeply welded onto our hearts. We may deny it, argue against it, and fight it. But the fact that it is something we are constantly bumping up against only suggests its reality in our souls.

I am often amused with people who insist that they are no longer Christians. But when it comes time to plan their memorial service they ask me to read the 23rd Psalm and sing "Amazing Grace." I officiate at the weddings of many non-churched couples. By and large, the majority wants traditional vows, the prayers of the church, and the reading of I Corinthians 13. I remember many years ago, taking a group of adolescent patients from our psychiatric hospital on a camping trip. Of course if you

go camping you have to have a campfire at night. One of the teens suggested that we sing songs. Guess what songs they remembered: "Kum Bay Yah" and "Amazing Grace." Even an atheist cannot escape the legacy of family religious identity.

It reminds me of an atheist walking in the woods and admiring its beauty. He thought to himself, "Evolution made that tree and evolution made those birds, and made the flowers in the field, and the grass." All of a sudden a Grizzly bear charges from the bushes. The man runs away trying to escape but trips on a root. As the bear prepares to pounce on him he screams, "OH MY GOD!"

The bear freezes in mid pounce and the trees stop waving in the wind. A bright light shines on him and a loud booming voice says, "You spend your entire life not believing in me, tell others not to believe in me, and attribute MY creation to natural selection! So why should I save you and if I do, am I to believe that you would now be a Christian?"

The atheist states that it would be hypocritical of him to assume that, but could God make the bear a Christian. God says, "OK" and time restarts. The bear gets down on his knees, folds his paws together and says, "Thank you, Lord, for this table and the meal I am about to receive. "

I know many Jewish friends who insist that they are only cultural Jews, not religious Jews. Or, they tell me that they are "not practicing" Jews. Yet, when they go to their mother's house on Friday evening, the Shabbat, they never forget to wear their yarmulke. My brother in law is a faithful Jewish man who enjoys a good rasher of bacon. I have Muslim cousins who enjoy fine beer once in a while. But they would be cut to the quick if I doubted or scorned their religious faith.

You see, we are all children of our religious heritage. We cannot take off our religious identity from our personal identity the way one removes a topcoat. Certainly, our understanding of faith grows and matures. In fact, I think there is nothing so dangerous as an adult with the beliefs of a child or adolescent. There will come a time in our faith development that our trust and understanding of God will enjoy the relationship of love freely given. We become less dependent on religious formula and more comfortable with the vagaries of the Spirit of Life. This is what Paul was trying to teach to the Galatians. Hopefully we will move beyond the strictures of absolutist solutions, even Christian ones, and rest in the affirmation that we can never know the mind of God. God's heart is beyond our comprehension, and our understanding of God will always be too small.

As a White, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant Male, who has a significant level of education and a comfortable lifestyle, I think it is easy to take everything I have just said for granted. In fact, it is easy to not think about it very much at all. I have been suckled on the hermeneutic of suspicion from my public school days through the writing of my doctoral thesis. Faith and religious identity are assumed and walk arm-in-arm with a critical eye that gives as much currency to doubt as it does to belief. For many people like me, my faith is often one of the last descriptors of my character.

During these days of distrust, intolerance, and even fear of other religious people, I think it is important to understand that most people in this world will front their religious identity before other characteristics such as family, occupation, or gender. They consider their faith community as essential to them as their family. Neither can be distinguished from the other. Their scriptures, prayer cycles, and

worship rituals are deeply woven into the fabric of their daily schedule. They look to their prophets, teachers, and clergy with more adoration than most Americans give respect to their President. Parents of these religious traditions are offended by and threatened by much of what they see of American culture as presented on television, film, and the world-wide-web. In their minds Paris Hilton, Mel Gibson, and Lindsay Lohan point to greater evil than any Protestant pastor could ever conjure out of the Prophet Muhammad.

So when members of the Spirit One Christian Center of Wichita gather outside a mosque, as they did on Friday, with signs that read, “Islam is a Lie – Jesus is the Truth,” we of the progressive Christian faith must take notice. We must take a stand. We need to carefully point out the lie that is the foundation of their very statement. We must hold the Muslims close to our hearts and give them assurance with our presence and friendship. And when someone paints a swastika on a mosque or Jewish synagogue we will be there with scrub brushes and fresh paint. When some frightened and hateful soul throws a brick through their school or sanctuary we will be there with brooms to sweep up the debris. Should someone burn them to the ground we will share our space and give them a home while they rebuild.

I make a special appeal on behalf of Muslim and Jewish children. Several years ago the School Superintendent of the Tulsa Public Schools announced that he would be participating in the prayer meeting called “Gather Round the Flagpole.” Several religious leaders gathered to inform the superintendent that he could not do that. He could allow it to happen because it was a student event. But he could not participate because that would suggest that the event was school sanctioned and

crossed the boundary of separation of church and state. The man could not honestly understand why his joining Christian students in prayer would be an issue for anyone else in the community. We tried to explain that the event was exclusive of Jews and Muslims. He still did not understand. Finally, Rabbi Marc Boone Fitzerman said to Dr. Thompson, “Sir, what you do not understand is that there is not a Jewish child in the City of Tulsa that has not experienced some form of discrimination. Not one!” I will not forget that statement for as long as I live. The room went silent. We were chilled by Marc’s direct truth. The Superintendent looked stunned. He did not appear at the “Gather Round the Flagpole” event.

My guess is that there is not one Jewish child or one Muslim child in Wichita that has not experienced some form of discrimination or ridicule. Not one. When you drive into your place of worship and a protestor holds a sign that your religion is a lie, how do you explain that to your children? When they watch the news with statements that “Islam is of the devil,” what are they to believe? When they are called “towel heads,” or “Christ killers,” what are Semitic children to think of themselves? It would be perfectly normal for them to ask, “What is wrong with us that people hate us so much?” It is a question that children of color asked in this country for four centuries.

One of the last memories that I will take from last night’s “Prayers for Peace” service is the presence of many children: Jewish, Muslim, and Christian. As we moved into Fellowship Hall the children went for the wonderful array of food. A Muslim little girl said, “I love cheese.” And in just a matter of moments children were running in and around Fellowship Hall, just as our own do on Sunday morning. That

told me that they felt safe to be children – to eat cheese and play tag. What a wonderful complement to you, University Congregational Church.

We will not shirk from the long-suffering work of assurance and compassion that will be ours in the years ahead. As the nation seems to tumble toward intolerance and disrespect, let us be a beacon of trust and profound respect. Let every child – Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, Sufi, or Sikh – know that here their dignity is held high. Our congregation’s covenant to work for peace, justice, and brotherhood holds the tiniest hand, regardless of race, religion, culture, ethnicity, or gender. For that is our heritage, our freedom, and our purpose. That is the estate that God has given us.

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