

Epworth Chapel on the Green
July 16th, 2017
Sixth Sunday after Pentecost: Wanted: Dead and Alive
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 55:1-13
Psalm 65:9-14
Romans 8:9-17
Matthew 13:1-23

Have you ever seen a historic poster like this? They were used by law enforcement back in the old west to help citizens identify wanted criminals, which the FBI and other agencies still do today. However, we no longer encourage citizens to take the law into their own hands and bring in the dead body of a wanted criminal. Today, we just want to find them alive, so justice can be served.

This poster reminds me of our surprising reading today from Romans chapter eight. Like law enforcement, God goes through great lengths to bring us to himself. We are in terrible debt to God, and He wants us dead and alive.

Let's start off by making it very clear that we are all in debt to God. In debt up to our ears. Verse 11 tells us that we owe our very lives to God. In many ancient cultures, if a man saved another man's life, then the man who was saved essentially became the servant of the other until death. Having one's life saved was seen as a debt that could not be repaid.

By telling us that he is addressing those who are of the Spirit and not the flesh in verse nine, we know that Paul is talking to fellow Christians about our debt to God. He is referring to our eternal life in Christ which was given to us, though we certainly do not deserve it. Paul doesn't mention it here, but as Christians, we are doubly indebted to God, because every single human being owes his or her physical life to God too. None of us would be here today, were it not for God's breath of life being breathed into us. He wants us alive.

OK, so we are in debt to God for our lives. Does that make us His slaves? That would certainly be His right, would it not? Is there anything, anything at all, that we have that didn't come from Him? The answer is a resounding *NO*. Paul's answer to my first question is very political. We are both His slaves, and not His slaves. On the one hand, Paul does say that we are under obligation. I'll return to this idea in a few minutes. Paul also says in verse 15 that we are not to be like slaves. So, God has given us both physical life and eternal life, yet despite our unpayable debt to Him, we are not His slaves! That's quite remarkable. That's like getting a letter from your Visa card saying that all debts have been forgiven, without you doing a thing. That would be very strange indeed.

Now things really get weird. Your Visa company has just told you that in addition to forgiving your debts, you can continue to use the card, and all future debts will be written off. This foolish company is going to lose their shirts! God, on the other hand, will not. Not only does He not enslave us for the debt we owe Him, but He has adopted us as His children! We have been brought into the family. We will always have a place where we belong. Despite all He has done for us, He is giving us more. God's economy isn't like ours.

Why adoption? Why not merely friends? I think the difference can be summed up as: *eternal commitment, shared consequences, intimacy and transparency*. *Eternal commitment* means that by becoming family, God will never walk away from us. Theologians may argue over whether or not we can walk away from God and lose our salvation, but God won't abandon us. There is nothing we can do that will cause Him to sever the relationship. Friendships can end. Friends grow apart, or without even meaning to, they can lose touch. Adoption, however, involves the commitment to ensure that never happens.

Secondly, *shared consequences* means that we all sink or swim together. By adopting us into His family, God takes on our successes and failures. In a family,

one person's success is everyone's success, just as one person's failure is everyone's failure. This is unique to families, and was even more true at the time Romans was written. Fathers typically trained their sons and brought them into the family business. Daughters learned from their mothers the many tasks they had to perform to keep the household running smoothly. Failures led to public shame, and possibly financial ruin. Friends, on the other hand, are mostly free to avoid the negative consequences of their friends' mistakes. There is probably sympathy, but no real consequences for the friend. Picture the friends of Job, who sat with him, thus demonstrating their very real concern and solidarity with their suffering friend. But in the end, their lives were not put through the roller coaster of suffering and joy that Job's was. So by God adopting us into His family, He is committing to be there with us, through thick or thin.

The *intimacy* we share as God's adopted children goes beyond the closeness of friends. In part because there is an understanding of *eternal commitment* to the relationship, and *shared consequences*, there is a level of intimacy within families that is unique. We share genes. We share a home. I tell puns that are just as groan-worthy as my dad's. Paul has this level of familial intimacy in mind when he says we cry out to God "Abba." The sense here is similar to when my three

year-old is in bed, and I hear him cry out, “Daddy, Daddy, Daddy!” He knows I’ll come to him. You don’t get to say “Daddy” if you aren’t part of the family. If you are wondering where “Abba” comes from, our translation today unfortunately translates it as “dear father,” while the four other versions that I checked all keep the word “Abba” untranslated. This is worth mentioning because “Abba” is Aramaic, and was retained in the original Greek text here, as well as when Jesus called upon His father in the garden of Gethsemane, as recorded in Mark 14:36. There is an intentional parallel here between us calling God *Abba*, and Jesus doing the same.

The last thing I want to say about being in God’s family is that it requires *transparency*. Because acceptance within a family is unconditional, there is nothing to hide from one’s family, and even if you tried, they would eventually find out anyway. We can hide nothing from God, and we don’t need to. He will love us no matter what, though our spiritual failings sadden Him. The sooner we start living without secrets, the better.

I realize I’ve described our earthly families in the ideal here. Few families can match the description I’ve just given. In fact, families can be a source of great

pain. But not so with God's family. The ideal earthly family can give us just an inkling of what joy there is to be found in God's perfect family, into which we have been adopted.

And let me just mention that the Spirit plays a key role in our adoption. Not only does the Holy Spirit make the adoption into God's family possible, but He also bears witness to the adoption, so that we can know beyond any doubt that we are members of God's family. How sad it would be to be adopted into God's family and not know it!

The last step in our progression from being debtors to being forgiven, and then adopted, is that we are made heirs to God's kingdom. That silly Visa card company that forgave your debts, and promised to forgive all future debts has just made you a major shareholder! This is what Romans 8:17 says: We are heirs with Christ, and will share all that God has. There are two striking thoughts here. First, we are elevated to a level equal with Christ as being co-heirs. Of course, this is merely positional, and is not based on any merit of our own, but only because God wills it. Being co-inheritors with Christ does not include having his authority or majesty, but it is still hard to comprehend.

The second striking thought is that God will withhold nothing from us. All God's blessings *will* be ours. Notice I said *will*—future tense. For those of you who were here last week, you know that we are living in the *now and the not yet*, when the Kingdom of God has arrived, but not entirely. Being an heir is like that. It is one who can trust in good things to come, but not yet.

Finally, there are two obligations that Paul lays out for us in this passage: The obligation to put the flesh to death, and to suffer with Christ. Remember I said that Paul was very political, saying that we both are and are not obliged to God? The obligation to put the flesh to death is laid out in verses 12 and 13, though you don't really get the sense of obligation from our translation we read today.

Today's reading merely says we are **not** under obligation to sin, but the original Greek says that we **are** under obligation, just not to our sinful nature. The next verse finishes the thought with the implied obligation to live obedient lives, which is really spiritual freedom. As Oswald Chambers wrote, "Either God or sin must die in my life" (*My Utmost for His Highest*, 175). Just in case you think this sounds like a spirit of slavery to a different master, keep in mind that God is giving us an obligation to truly live. He wants us dead to sin so we can be truly alive! We

cannot live lives of freedom if we keep returning to our sins. As I said last week, living holy lives is a matter of our spirit reacting to the Holy Spirit, and not resisting the work He is doing in us. It is neither a matter of doing it all on our own, nor of waiting passively for God to do it all for us. So with the help of the Holy Spirit, we put the flesh to death in our lives.

The obligation to suffer with Christ is found in verse 17, and is conditional: If we want to be heirs to the Kingdom, we must also suffer with Christ. This does not mean we will suffer in the same way that Christ suffered—very few of us will be called to die for our beliefs. Nor is this suffering that which comes as a natural result of sin. The suffering we are called to results from putting our relationship with Jesus Christ above all else. Doing so costs us our own will, because serving Christ means submitting our wills to Him. It also involves the pain of changing. I will quote Oswald Chambers again, who puts it, “God will not shield us from the requirements of a son. God’s grace turns out men and women with a strong family likeness to Jesus Christ, not milksops” (*My Utmost for His Highest*, 189). Now I don’t know exactly what a “milksop” is, but I can assure you, it’s not good. If we are to be heirs with Christ, then God will transform us to be like Him. Considering how different we are from Jesus, you can bet it won’t be an easy process. And thanks

to our innate stubbornness as sinners, God usually has to allow pain to teach us the lessons we need to learn. I know that firsthand, I can tell you.

I think it important that we also take a peek at verse 18, even though it wasn't in today's reading. It adds an element to the suffering that is worth noting: It is the suffering of "this present age." In other words, this suffering is inherent in the tension of the *now and the not yet*. Man, we just can't seem to get away from this theme. The next time you feel like the price is too high, remember that you aren't alone, your trials are temporary, and you have a heavenly inheritance waiting.

As we prepare to partake of the Eucharist today, remember what a glorious, and unexpected journey upon which God has brought us. He has given us life, and then rather than making us slaves, He adopted us into His family, and made us heirs with Christ of every treasure in Heaven. He has given us the obligation to put the flesh to death and to suffer with Christ. God does this because He wants us dead—dead to sin. He has also given us life, freedom, belonging, and a heavenly inheritance—all because He wants us alive. So God wants us dead and alive. That might sound strange, but the Eucharist rehearses the fact that Jesus

too, is dead and alive. As co-heirs with Christ, may the Eucharist remind us of, and make real, this family resemblance.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.