

Message: A Spirit of Adoption¹

I have a story to tell you this morning. It begins with a question.

What’s the creepiest sound you ever heard?

For Russell and Maria Moore, the creepiest sound was nothing at all. They were in the hallway of an orphanage in the former Soviet Union, on the first of two trips required by a petition to adopt. The orphanage staff led them down a hallway to meet the two one-year-old boys they hoped to adopt. What scared them wasn’t the conditions and stench.

What scared them was the quiet. The place was silent.

Russell asked Maria, “Why is it so quiet? The place is filled with babies.” The stillness was a stark contrast to the noise of a nursery in the U.S. Listening carefully, they could hear the bumping of cribs and thumbs being sucked. That’s all. These children didn’t cry because infants eventually learn to stop crying if no one ever responds to their calls for food, for comfort, for love. No one ever responded to these children. So they stopped.

When Maria and Russell entered the boys’ room, it was the same.

Sergei (now Timothy) bounced up and down while Maxim (now Benjamin) stood. Neither boy made a sound. The couple read them books they couldn’t understand, but there were no squeals, cries or groans. Every day, when they left, it was the same as when they arrived: silence.

The couple dreaded the last day, when they had to leave and return to the U.S. to wait for the legal paperwork to be completed. After that, they could return to take the boys home for good. After hugging and kissing the boys, Maria and Russell walked into the hallway in tears.

That’s when they heard the scream. Little Maxim fell back in his crib and let out a yell. It seemed like he knew, maybe for the first time, that he would be heard. At some level, he knew he had parents now. Russell says that he will never forget how the hairs on his arms stood up when he heard the cry. He was struck by the force of the cry.

¹ Material drawn from “Abba Changes Everything” by Russell Moore, *Christianity Today*, 2010

He was reminded of the cry “Abba! Father!” that Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans. That’s the same passage we read earlier which talks about the doctrine of adoption. It’s hard to talk about adoption by God without talking about real adoption.

Families reflect something eternally true about God. Paul wrote, “*I bow my knees before [God], from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name*” (Ephesians 3:14-15, NRSV). We know what human parenting should look like based on God’s behavior toward us. God loves us and wants to be in a relationship with us. The reverse is also true. We see something of God’s parenthood in our relationship with our human parents. Jesus tells us that the way our parents provide for us, teach us and discipline us shows us God’s active love toward us (Matthew 7:9-11; Hebrews 12:5-17).

The same principle is at work in adoption. Adoption is good news. Our identity and inheritance are grounded in our adoption in Christ. Adoption is also our mission. Our adoption spurs us to join Christ as advocates for the poor, the marginalized, the abandoned, and the orphans. Without Christ, care for others often seems like one more cause for compassionate people to follow until the trend dies down. Without the missional aspect, the doctrine of adoption too easily becomes mere metaphor, just another way to say “I’m saved” but not mean it.

The child’s scream changed everything - more than a judge's verdict or notarized paperwork. It was the moment, when the child recognized he would be heard, that he went from being an orphan to being a child. It was also the moment when the couple became parents, in fact if not in law. They recognized that something was wrong, because suddenly, life as it had been seemed terribly disordered. That’s true for us, too.

We can read and preach the “Abba” passage in Romans with comfort and familiarity, the spiritual equivalent of an infant cooing “Papa” or “Daddy.” Relational intimacy is surely present in the text, but it definitely isn't sentimental. Jesus’ Spirit lets our hearts cry “*Abba, Father!*” (Galatians 4:6). This is an echo of Jesus’ cry “*Abba, Father*” as he prays “*with loud cries and tears*” for deliverance in the Garden of Gethsemane (Hebrews 5:7; Mark 14:36). The Spirit of adoption shows

us that we “groan” with creation itself “*as we wait eagerly for adoption as children, the redemption of our bodies*” (Romans 8:23). This isn’t a cry of comfort. It’s the scream of the crucified, those in pain. We can’t live or survive alone. We need God.

The Spirit of adoption challenges us to recognize ourselves as spiritual orphans. The Spirit compels us to see our fallen universe - and our own egocentric kingdoms in it - as not the way it’s supposed to be. We ought to recognize this more often than we do. We rightly insist that “*everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved*” (Romans 10:13). We want to respond with Isaiah, “*Here I am, Lord. Send me!*” (Isaiah 6:8). But we rarely feel how desperate - and how liberating - the call is. We assume it’s a cry only at the beginning of the Christian walk, not through the ongoing work of the Spirit. We grow complacent, too comfortable to cry out for a Savior we can sense only by faith.

The “Abba” cry of our adoption defines who we are and what family we belong to. That’s why the Spirit of adoption has everything to do with church unity and not the divisions of Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, rich and poor (Galatians 3:28). None of us are natural-born children of God, entitled to all this grace, all this glory. It’s not just the Gentiles who were adopted into this family. The Jewish Christians, too, received adoption (Romans 9:4). The same is true for all races and people, no matter what our label may be. If we believe in Christ, we’re adopted into the family. It’s not exclusive, but inclusive.

What’s our response? We, as Christians, welcome and receive newcomers because, in Christ, we have been received. Our identity and our inheritance are found in Christ. Russell says that he was reluctant to adopt at first, because he assumed an adopted child would always be more distant than a child “of his own.” Today, he knows he was wrong. And he should have known better. There are no “adopted children” of God, as an ongoing category. Adoption tells us how we came into the family of God. And once we are here, no distinction is drawn between those at the dinner table. Love based on genetic material is not a Christian view of reality. All are God’s children if we cry out and believe.

The Spirit of adoption teaches us something revolutionary.

Christians often seem to identify more with corporate brands and political parties than with each other in our local churches. But our adoption in Christ shouldn't make us warring partisans but loving brothers and sisters, whom the Spirit has taken from the division of Babel to the oneness of Pentecost. The church's unity attests to the “*manifold wisdom of God*” (Ephesians 3:10). Would our good news be more credible if “church family” wasn't just a slogan, if “brothers and sisters” was more than metaphor? What would happen if the world saw fewer “white churches” and “ethnic churches,” fewer “blue-collar churches” and “white-collar churches,” fewer baby boomer and emerging churches, fewer traditional or contemporary churches, and fewer fundamental or progressive churches?

What would happen if the world saw more churches whose members have little in common except being saved by Jesus?

Our churches ought to be showing families how love and belonging transcend categories of the flesh. Instead, though, it seems God is using blended families to teach the church. In fact, perhaps we so often wonder whether others can really be brothers and sisters is because we so rarely see God's love displayed – fully and deeply - among those gathered. Let's challenge our sameness, as more families in the church are starting to show us the meaning of unity in diversity.

That's why the Spirit of adoption makes the church countercultural.

Others would prefer that we find our identity and inheritance in what we can see and verify as ours, rather than according to the movement of God's Spirit. When we embrace the Spirit of adoption, we find our identity. We're God's children, brothers and sisters of Christ. We're joint heirs of the kingdom of God.

As we learn more about our new identity, let's reflect on the economy and priorities of our new household. God consistently urges us to care for the orphan, the widow, and the immigrant (Deuteronomy 24:17-22). God announces, “*If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry*” (Ex. 22:23). The Spirit drives us not just to cry “*Abba*,” but to respond to the cries of the weak through mission.

Paul's letter to the Romans isn't a text on systematic theology.

It's a missionary manifesto, calling the church to unify and join in making Christ known to the nations (Romans 15:1-21). This is why James - the brother of Jesus - tells us that caring for strangers, widows and orphans is the essence of “*pure and undefiled*” religion (James 1:27). And Jesus himself - adopted by the righteous Joseph - identifies himself with the “*least of these*” (Matthew 25:40). And he tells us that the first time we hear Jesus’ voice in person, he will be asking if we did the same. Genuine faith works through love (Galatians 5:6). The mission of Christ points us to a God of both justice and justification.

Scripture characterizes the kingdom of Christ as a kingdom of rescued children. Solomon sings, “*For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight*” (Psalm 72:12-14). When we care for others, we’re doing more than cultural activism. A culture of openness and adoption announces what the kingdom of God looks like and to whom it belongs. We're in it to see faith delivered, once and for all, to those who believe (Jude 3).

The universe around us is silent - like an orphanage in which the children no longer believe they will be heard. But if we listen with Galilean ears, we can hear the quiet desperation of thumbs being sucked, of cribs being rocked. As we welcome those who have been orphaned by the world into our church and our homes, we can show the world what it means to belong to a God who welcomes everyone with love.

Let's remember we were orphans once, and someone came looking for us, someone who taught us to call him “Abba.” Let's be ambassadors for the One who loves all the little children of the world. Like Jesus, let's welcome others into our homes, our church, and our lives, especially those we aren't supposed to want. Let's do so with love and you'll be amazed because the way of love is the way of life and light. There is no fear in perfect love.

Lord, I'm here. Send me!

Let us pray ...

Lord, thank you for sending us your Spirit. Thank you for lifting us out of our fears – fear of others and what we do not understand. Your Spirit, the Spirit of divine adoption, is at work in us. Hear us when we cry “Abba, Father!” Awaken our heart, mind and soul to the new life we have as your child. Help us to invite others to know your love so they, too, may cry out to you and be saved. We pray this in the name of the One who saved us and sent us that Spirit, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Romans 8:12-17 (CEB)

So then, brothers and sisters, we have an obligation, but it isn't an obligation to ourselves to live our lives on the basis of selfishness. If you live on the basis of selfishness, you are going to die. But if by the Spirit you put to death the actions of the body, you will live. All who are led by God's Spirit are God's sons and daughters. You didn't receive a spirit of slavery to lead you back again into fear, but you received a Spirit that shows you are adopted as his children. With this Spirit, we cry, “Abba, Father.” The same Spirit agrees with our spirit, that we are God's children. But if we are children, we are also heirs. We are God's heirs and fellow heirs with Christ, if we really suffer with him so that we can also be glorified with him.