

Sermon for The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

Date: August 23, 2020

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Isaiah 55:10-13

Epistle Reading: Romans 8:12-17

Gospel Reading: Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23



Sermon Text: Romans 8:12-17

Sermon Title: God is Our Father in Heaven

Introit: Psalm 28:1-2,6-7; Antiphon: Psalm 28:8

Hymns:

LSB 823 – May God Bestow on us His Grace

LSB 849 – Praise the One Who Breaks
the Darkness

LSB 528 – Oh for a Thousand Tongues to Sing

Liturgy:

Divine Service I, p. 151

Songs:

Hear Our Praises

By Our Love

Praise the One Who Breaks
the Darkness

That's Why We Praise Him

Liturgy:

Creative Worship



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Text: Romans 8:12–17

So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

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Grace to you and peace, in Jesus' name. Amen.

I'd like to begin today by looking at two pictures: one is an etching, and the other a painting. They are both by the same artist. They are both of the same subject, but there is a world of difference between them. The artist is Rembrandt and the subject is the return of the prodigal son. In 1636, Rembrandt created a small etching of this scene. Then, 32 years later, he returned to the subject and painted a larger masterpiece.

When you contrast these two you notice a profound difference between them. In the etching Rembrandt focuses on action. The scene is filled with movement. People are descending the stairs. Some are watching their step, one looks to the side, another looks downward, but all are rushing to join the father who has hurried out before them to lean over and embrace his son. The father, himself, is moving forward. Rembrandt catches him in mid-stride, as he rushes to reach out and embrace his son.

In the painting, however, the scene is different. Here, Rembrandt creates a sense of stillness. He focuses on presence rather than action. No one is moving. All of the people, whether standing or sitting, are gazing on one central event. The father leaning over his son, the son leaning into his father.

It is as if time has stopped, and one sees that moment, that eternal moment, when the father acknowledges, claims, receives, blesses, and loves his son. The father has claimed his child, and Rembrandt sought to capture that moment.

I begin with those images because in our reading from Romans this morning, Paul does something very similar. He has revealed to us Christ our Deliverer. Now he focuses our eyes on God, our Father. Rescued by Christ from the power of sin, we are brought into the kingdom of God, where we live by the Spirit as children of God.

That is the main point Paul wants to communicate to the Church in Rome, and still to us today. In Christ God claims you as His own. God is our Father and we are His children. What does it mean to be claimed as God's child?

To answer that question, Paul creates a contrast between slaves and sons. Paul writes,

You did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba, Father!'"

Did you notice how Paul turns our attention to a moment of prayer? He asks asks the Church to stop, and really think about what happens when we pray. Our words are suspended in mid-air – “Our Father who art in heaven...” Paul wants us to hear those words. Paul freezes that moment, and asks us to consider what it means to be God’s child.

If you look closely at the painting, you can see what it looks like. Rembrandt places the son’s head on his father’s chest and the father uses his hands to draw his son closer. What is strange, however, is that the son looks less like a son and more like slave. His head is shaven like a prisoner. His eyes are closed as if he were exhausted. He brings all of his slavery before his father, and the father reaches out down to claim this slave as his son.

He hovers over him in love. He places his hands on him and draws in. The child brings slavery to the father, but the father brings the blessing of family to the child. This child is no longer a slave but a son. No longer a prisoner to the poison of sin, but a child of God.

This is what Paul is celebrating in his letter to the Church in Rome. By nature our sinful desires consume us and take us far from the kingdom of God. We live as prodigals; as wasteful children with no care for the cost of the things we have been given. Imprisoned and exiled from kingdom of our Father.

God, however, has brought us to life in the death of His Son. The Father sent His Son, Jesus Christ, out of love for His children. In dying Jesus took on Himself the exile of our sin. In rising to life Jesus brings us into the kingdom of His Father.

Today, in Jesus, we bring our slavery before God. We confess the ways we have been less than God’s children. The ways we have been enslaved to the experience and rule of this world. God, however, comes to us in Jesus. He places His hands on us, and draws us near to His heart in love. Today you are once again claimed by God to be one of His beloved children.

As Paul writes,

“The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God.” The Spirit cries out with your spirit,
“Abba, Father.”¹

The Church has a way of reminding us of that moment. It’s hidden away in our hymnals, buried deep within the minor details of liturgical functions, but it is there. I’d like you think about two moments in life captured and displayed in the liturgy: the moment of Holy Baptism and the moment of dying.

1 Romans 8:16

In the service of Holy Baptism, and the Commendation of the Dying, the pastor does one simple thing, whether that person is being baptized or dying, and he asks everyone who is gathered around to pray the Lord's Prayer. If you were baptized as an infant, you couldn't say the Lord's Prayer, but the congregation said it for you. If you are lying there, unconscious and about to die, you could not say the Lord's Prayer but again the pastor and the Church say it for you.

We do that because God, in this moment, is coming and claiming you as His child. In Holy Baptism, as you are brought into the kingdom, the Church offers you the Lord's Prayer. This is your prayer, your language, to use to speak to God your Father. As you leave this world, the Church gathers again to testify that you are God's precious child. These are your words. God has given them to you. Because you are in Christ, you can call God your Father and nothing, not even death, can take that away from you.

Later in this service, we will again pray the Lord's prayer. I'd like you to think. This is not just a repetition of a prayer that we say every week. It is not something to say without paying attention. This is the working of the Holy Spirit. Even now among us at this very moment, God is reaching out and placing His hands on you, drawing you close, and the Holy Spirit is testifying with our spirit that we are children of God. From Baptism to the grave and every moment in between, we cry out "Abba, Father" and rejoice that we are children of God.

When Jesus taught us to pray to God our Father, He also taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come." Paul's words remind us of this.

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.²

Heirs of God. These words are so necessary in our world today. Daily we are bombarded by messages that try to take God's kingdom from us. Take a moment and look at the advertisements around you. The pictures that draw you away from the things of God to the things of this world. Hair care and cell phones, designer clothing and fine food, vacation get-aways and luxury cars. The riches of this world are set on display before you. As you watch you have seems less significant than the life you could have.

2 Romans 8:16-17

Words of God to His people to not covet the things of this world, to love one's neighbor as one's self, to be content with the calling into which you placed, to rise and labor for the good of others, and to draw near and come in the house of God, these things are made to seem so outdated. So America becomes the promised land. The place where we can indulge our desires, make something of ourselves, get ahead in this world, and if we keep a little bit of religion in our back pocket, trust that we will be blessed in the world to come. Being a child of God however, means something different.

Consider for a moment in the history of Israel. Moses stood before God on Mount Sinai. Israel had sinned against God, aroused God's anger, and God has threatened to destroy His chosen people. Then Moses interceded for them and God listens. God, however, offers Moses a strange vision of life for the people of Israel. God says that they can have the promised land, the vineyards, the olive groves, the fields for barley and wheat, the pastures for cattle and sheep, the cities and the towns, all of the land flowing with milk and honey. They can have it. All of it, but they will have it without Him. God will not go with them into the Promised Land.

Moses puts the coveting of this world's treasures aside. He is not tempted by the glossy pictures. He knows that without God they have nothing. What good is it to gain the whole world and lose your soul?³ So Moses comes before God with nothing to offer. He simply relies on God's mercy and prays,

If your Presence does not go with us, do not bring us up
from here.⁴

Moses will not have the kingdom without God.

If you listen to Paul's words, you'll notice how he focuses on our relationship to God rather than things in this world. We are heirs, he says. Heirs of God. Not just heirs of a kingdom. We are heirs of God's Kingdom. God Himself has promised to go with us. He has called us together as His people and sent us to live in this land. Our lives will look different than those of the people around us. We will bless and not curse. We will be content with the calling into which God has called us. We will rise and labor for the good of others and draw near and come in the house of God.

Now that kind of life will not indulge in all the pleasures that the world has to offer. It will not climb the corporate ladder. We are called to be content with what God gives us, knowing that in His Kingdom His presence is the greatest desire we should pursue.

³ Mark 8:36

⁴ Exodus 33:15

If you look at Rembrandt's painting of the prodigal son, you will notice that he has frozen the story at just the moment before the son receives all of the gifts from his father. The son does not have a robe placed over him yet. He does not have his father's ring on his finger, he does not have good shoes on his feet. What the son does have is his father. He does not ask for anything else.

Our Lord has called us to live as His people by faith. When Jesus spoke to His disciples, He encouraged them to take up their cross and follow Him. Life in this world will not be easy. It may not be filled with the best this world has to offer, but it will be filled with God's love. Our heavenly Father's work will continue, and we have the privilege of being called into God's mission. We are the children of God, at work in our Father's kingdom, bringing salvation to the ends of the earth.

I mentioned earlier that 32 years had passed between the first and last time Rembrandt worked with the prodigal son. Many things happened in Rembrandt's life during those 32 years. He lost his wife, his wealth, three of his four children, and his reputation. Then lost his last and only surviving son.

“In the world, you will have tribulation,” our Lord says,
“but take heart; I have overcome the world.”⁵

After losing all that our world would say gives life meaning, Rembrandt chose to focus on the one thing that Jesus gives that this world cannot take away. The Spirit of adoption. God the Father, claims you as His child. Jesus makes us children of His heavenly Father. We bring our slavery to sin before God and in Jesus we are forgiven. Our fears are silenced, and our future is secure. It is secure because you are Baptized and as such, a child of the Holy One, our Sovereign and our Lord.

Amen.



**Proclaim God's Word,
Encourage one another in faith,
Witness to God's love and
Serve all people**