

First Presbyterian Church
Marianna, Florida
Sunday, May 27, 2007
Sermon by Huw Christopher, Pastor

Scripture Readings: John 14: 15-21

Romans 8:12-17

Sermon Title: “What does it Mean to be the Children of God?”

Sermon Text: Romans 8:15 - 16: For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, “Abba! Father! It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

May today there be peace within.

May you trust God that you are exactly where you are meant to be.

May you not forget the infinite possibilities that are born of faith.

May you use those gifts that you have received,
and pass on the love that has been given to you.

May you be content knowing you are a child of God.

Let this presence settle into our bones, and allow your soul the freedom
to sing, dance, praise and love.

It is there for each and every one of you.

Some of you may be far more familiar with the words of that prayer than I was until recently. I was introduced to it when Albert Milton, as our Elder of the Month for May, shared it recently as the closing prayer at our Session Meeting. He said that he has received it in an e-mail from a friend.

I do not know how many of you like Albert Milton may have received a copy of this prayer through an e-mail. I do not know either why this prayer which was written by a young lady who died on September 30, 1897 at the age of 24 after spending almost the last ten years of her life as a cloistered Carmelite novice in a convent in France has become popular in recent years so that people would want to share it in this way. The young lady who wrote this prayer later became a saint in the Catholic Church, and is known as St. Therese of Lisieux. Her prayer is one she would pray for all of us as she says, “may you be content in knowing you are a child of God.” As we hear the words of her prayer we are prompted again to ask the question of our sermon title, “What does it mean to be the children of God?” What thoughts came to your mind as you read that question? What is it that would or should make us to be content knowing that we are children of God?

Part of the reason that we have heard those words of Paul to the Christians in Rome this morning as we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is because he makes clear that our being the children of God is the work of the Spirit of God. He says, “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God.” He also says, “When we cry ‘Abba’ ‘Father’ it is the very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are the children of God.” Between those two verses he goes on to talk of the assurance and the contentedness that the Holy Spirit brings to our lives as the children of God when he says that we did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear. Rather he says we have received the spirit of adoption. Paul’s use of the image of adoption reminds us in a most significant way of what it means to be the children of God. As some in this congregation know only too well

adoption is based entirely upon the will and action of the one who is doing the adopting and not on that of the one being adopted. This is true whether we are talking of adopting an animal from the local Partners for Pets, or adopting a child from this country or from another part of the world. However cute, adorable or loveable the animal or child might be that does not assure them that they will be adopted. The choice is entirely up to the person or persons who are choosing to adopt the animal or child. In the same way however cute, adorable, loveable we might feel we are, we can be content in knowing we are the children of God only because we know that God has chosen us. The whole message of the Bible is that of the God who reaches out to people to show love and acceptance, not because they deserve it or are worthy of it, nor, indeed, because they are even ready to accept it, but because God freely chooses to relate to human beings in this way. The message of the Bible stands in sharp contrast to so many religions in which people seek through their sacrifices or their good works to make themselves pleasing to God so that God will accept them as God's children. Such an approach leaves people anxious and fearful and concerned rather than contented because they can never be certain that they have done enough to make themselves worthy of a relationship with God.

What does it mean to be the children of God? It means that we can rest content in all that God in love and mercy has done to assure us that God desires a loving, intimate relationship with us as his children. Ours is a love simply to accept in faith, and not something of which we have to strive to make ourselves worthy. In her prayer St. Therese says, "Let this presence settle into your bones, and allow your soul the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love." She does not clarify what she means by "this presence." Paul, though, would remind us that our bodies are the temple of the Holy Spirit. (I Corinthians 6:19) It is surely this very

presence of God through the Holy Spirit that St. Therese would pray that we might allow to settle into our bones to assure us that we are the children of God. It is as we live in the contentment and with the assurance that we are the children of God that we can allow our souls the freedom to sing, dance, praise and love, knowing that we are loved with a love far beyond anything we might expect or that we deserve, and from which nothing in heaven or on earth can separate us.

As that Spirit of God settles into our bones and we live with that assurance and contentment of being the children of God so we find the promise of Jesus being fulfilled that we will not have the feeling and fear of being left and abandoned as orphans. What does it mean to be the children of God? It means that we can rest content knowing that we will never be abandoned or left alone. Out of her own experience of a difficult marriage and subsequent divorce and the loneliness she felt at that time, then a nervous breakdown that cut short a promising teaching career, the slow declining health and deaths of her parents, and the declining ability and health of an older second husband a cousin of mine a few years ago wrote of what this assurance of being a child of God meant to her, and the contentment that it brought to her life. She wrote as if God was speaking to her. As we listen to her words she would invite us to hear God speaking to us again today.

Listen to me, my child, have no fear

For I am the Lord, your God.

I will be with you.

I will pour out my love upon you,

For I am your Comforter and Saviour.

I will hold you in the safety of my arms

And never, no never forsake you.

Listen to me, my child, have no fear.

For I am the Lord your God,

I will be with you

(Jennifer Collins, Weston-Super-Mare, England, United Kingdom 1997)

As we allow that assurance of the presence of God through the Holy Spirit with us at all times to settle into our bones so we come to know what it is be content knowing that we are the children of God.

As we look at the world, or our nation, or even just our own community today it is clear that not everyone lives in the contentment and assurance of being a child of God. As St. Therese says of being a child of God, “it is there for each and every one of you.” God seeks a loving intimate relationship with all people, but because it a relationship of love it is a relationship which God forces on no one. All people have to choose whether or not they will respond to God’s love and allow the Holy Spirit to bring to their lives the assurance and the contentment of being the children of God. We can live in the assurance and contentment of being the children of God only as we are ready to sing and to pray in the words of our anthem, “Come Down, O Love Divine, Seek Thou this soul of mine.”

Unfortunately, of course, as people consciously or unconsciously reject a loving relationship as children of God they look for contentment, and for a self-identity, and the assurance of who they are in so many different, often self-centered, ways and places. Such ways frequently reflect hatred rather than love,

and lead to seeking to destroy those who are different, or to the abuse their own bodies through various addictions, or the abuse of others for their own ends, or even for their own pleasure. We will be reminded of this again today as we receive our Pentecost Offering and think about the fact that there is a need even in our own community for Stop-Over House for abused or neglected children. On this Memorial Day weekend we are also reminded of the way in which over the years many have had to give of their time and their talents and their energy, and some of their very lives to protect the freedom of people to know and to be the children God desires them to be. Unfortunately, still today we remember that such sacrifices are not just things of the past but that they are having to be made each and every day. The deaths almost daily of American soldiers in Iraq makes us almost immune to the fact that these are not just statistics of a war, but these are individuals whose death will bring grief and sorrow to family and friends. As a result of the current war, Memorial Day this year and future years will take on new meaning for many families.

Seeing such hatred and evil, what is it that stops people from responding in like manner? Chaplain Major John Morris, one of our military chaplains who has served in Iraq, out of his experience has affirmed, "the only thing that pulled me back from that was the power of the Holy Spirit, all the Christian disciplines, and my sense of understanding that, wait a minute, as much as I abhor everything that's done, and as much as I believe what was done was evil, and that if these people don't come out and surrender, there's only one alternative, that is to go in and kill them or apprehend them. I knew I could not cross that line and say, "OK, God's on my side, and here we go." No, this is chaos, this is human fallenness to the max, and we're using the most brutal tool of human society, the military, to solve a very, very terrible problem. And this isn't God here, this is fallen human beings. So God

help me and have mercy on me. I'm a part of something like this, and I prayed that it wouldn't be, but here we are. Save me from becoming a debased, immoral human being. And save my soldiers as well.” (Quoted in Speaking of Faith newsletter at www.speakingthefaith.org on Thursday, May 24, 2007)

I do not know why the prayer of St. Therese of Lisieux has been circulated around the internet on e-mails in recent days. If the sharing of this prayer, though, does nothing else than to save people everywhere from becoming debased, immoral human beings because they come to know what it is to be content in knowing that they are children of God, then it can be the source of tremendous blessing to people's lives, and to the life of the whole world. As we remember the way in which the Spirit of God, whose coming we celebrate on this Day of Pentecost, enables us to rest content in being children of God let us affirm again the Spirit's work in our own lives using the words of affirmation printed in the bulletin....

*** AFFIRMATION OF FAITH:** *from The Brief Statement of Faith of the
Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)*

We trust in God the Holy Spirit, everywhere the giver and renewer of life. The Spirit justifies by grace through faith, sets us free to accept ourselves and to love God and neighbor, and binds us together with all believers in the one body of Christ, the Church.

The same Spirit who inspired the prophets and apostles rules our faith and life in Christ through Scripture, engages us through the Word proclaimed, claims us in the waters of baptism, feeds us with the bread of life and the cup of salvation, and calls women and men to all ministries of the Church.