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Christmas 1 • Galatians 4:4–7 • December 28, 2014

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The celebration of Christmas begins, in stores and media, months before December 25. Advent has led up to the church's celebrations of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Now, three days later, the season of Christmas continues. But what is left to say? What is left now that the children's program has brought the trip to the manger back to life for us? What is left after once again hearing (and preaching on) Luke 2 and Matthew 1? The climatic services are over and it's time to muster up the energy for preaching on . . . the First Sunday of Christmas.

Ironically, our text gives us too much to preach on in one sermon! Fullness of time. Sent. Birth. Law. Redemption. Adoption. Spirit. Abba. Inheritance. With so many metaphors for the gospel and actions by our Triune God the preacher needs to be selective. At the same time, Paul's thought progression is so tight and sequential, that to leave something out disrupts the force of the passage. Hence, this approach follows the flow of the text, but does so under the dominant metaphor of birth or adoption into a family. The structure begins with the human family into which we are born, and moves the hearers into the adopted family made possible by Jesus's birth into the human family. The goal is that hearers will believe more firmly that they have been adopted into God's family.

Born into One Family; Adopted into Another¹

I began with the quip "You can pick your friends but you are stuck with your family." We are born into our families. We don't pick our parents or other relatives. We're stuck in that family. While many happy family moments occur, we also can be hurt in families. Dysfunctional families can damage the members within them in ways that are not pretty.

I encouraged the people to think bigger than the immediate family. We are all born into the human race. We are stuck with the human family. It is a dysfunctional family and does things to us that are not pretty. I went to Paul's list of the works of the flesh (Gal 5:19–21). After reading the list, I focused on three areas:

First—sexuality. God’s gift of sexuality is to be celebrated in the husband/wife marital relationship, but the human family has misused it. I followed the pattern of smaller to bigger again, with smaller being the everyday moments we experience and the bigger more worldwide. TV, movies, magazines at the grocery checkout line, billboards; then pornography; and then sex-slave trafficking (I Googled the last one to get a few disturbing statistics). The refrain I used here and in the next examples is—“This is the family we are stuck with.”

Second—anger, enmity, and divisions. Again, I started with small examples that led to bigger ones: Anger from hitting four red lights in a row, or getting in the slow checkout line; using words on social media when tired and impatient that damage or break relationships; then school shootings, domestic violence, abuse, rising rates of violent crime (again I Googled for the stats); and then terrorism, and war.

Third—drunkenness. I used some stats from an article from *Christianity Today* in which the author moved into a low-income apartment complex in a large urban area to carry out a caring ministry.² She saw how alcohol disproportionately affected minorities and the poor. One in six Americans has a drinking problem. Seventy percent of children in foster care show the effects of prenatal alcohol exposure.

This is the family we are born into. We are stuck in this family. But, it is not the only family. Jesus opens the door to a different family home. Here I followed the text’s structure:

In God’s time, he decided when the time had come to fulfill his promises in Genesis 3:15 and Isaiah 9:6.

Jesus is born of a woman. He is born one of us. Here I described the manger scene, and spoke especially of Jesus having arms, legs, fingers, and toes. Mary could caress his cheek. But, he is born into the human family!

Under the law. This phrase gave me the opportunity to mention the law’s accusing and punishing roles. The death declared in the garden of Eden is physical and spiritual. But, Jesus is unique. The law can’t convict him. No punishment is due him. I retold the Transfiguration scene, emphasizing the Father’s words “With him I am well pleased” to show he had done nothing wrong.

To redeem us. Here is the gospel proclamation of Jesus, now with grown-up hands and feet, hanging on the cross. He takes the punishment for us. He goes through the punishment of separation from his Father, a spiritual death, with “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” It’s the same for his physical death. His heart stops beating; his arms and legs go limp. He is buried. He takes the condemnation of the law we were under onto himself so that we could be adopted into a new family. It is the greatest Christmas present ever (John 3:16; Romans 5:6–8).

We are adopted. Here I returned to the “pick your friends” quip of the introduction, only to have God as the one who chooses us. I went to two or three people at each service and declared: “Bob, God has chosen you.” Joyce, God has adopted you.” “Dave, God has selected you.” Then I included everyone with a sweep of the hand to say, “We may be born into the human family, but because of Jesus we are adopted into God’s family.”

It is Christmas every day because the Holy Spirit has been sent into our hearts.

He leads us to say “Abba Father.” I used the Lord’s Prayer here. Then I went bigger again to speak of what it’s like to be in God’s family with the gift of the Holy Spirit present in the life of the church. In answer to the works of the flesh earlier in the sermon, I brought in the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22–23). Then I spoke three short prayers, each beginning with “Abba, Father.” One was for patience in an angry world. Another was for compassion for those who struggle with abuse and addiction. The third was for kindness and gentleness.

I finished the sermon by telling of a pastor who, at the time of the sermon, was adopting two children from overseas. The family would need to live for at least six weeks in that country to complete the adoptions. The congregation where he had been a pastor for only one year was incredibly supportive, giving him time away from the congregation that was needed and helping with fundraisers. The pastor and his wife and their two children flew overseas to adopt the children. The children to be adopted were at an orphanage. One has scoliosis and is in a wheelchair. Within a couple of visits that child was starting to say “papa.” And, where is the adoption taking place? Ukraine.³ In the midst of the anger and violence is compassion, kindness, and patience. This is what the family of God looks like when adopted by our Abba Father because of the Christmas gift named Jesus, and the Holy Spirit forming his fruit in us brothers and sisters. We may be born into the human family, but when you are adopted into God’s family, it’s Christmas every day.

Glenn A. Nielsen

Endnotes

¹ I had the opportunity to preach this sermon at a congregation in the St. Louis area on Pentecost Sunday. The following annotated structure gives a summary of each section and the examples I used during the sermon. Since the structure is to be used during the Christmas season, examples that are more recent may be available, especially ones that connect with the congregation’s celebration of Christmas.

² D. L. Mayfield, “Why I Gave Up Alcohol,” *Christianity Today*, June 2014, 34–41, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2014/june/why-i-gave-up-alcohol.html?paging=off>.

³ When I asked the pastor what agency he and his wife were working through, he wrote: “While we are technically doing an independent adoption we found our facilitation team through the fine folks at