



# First United Church of Oak Park

Adopted

Ephesians 1:3-12

The Rev. Dr. Deborah Kapp

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For the last few weeks after church, we've invited people into conversations about who First United is as a congregation. These occasions have given us a chance to talk about how we relate to our community as an institution and how we think about ourselves theologically. We have grounded our discussions in the particularity of First United: this church, in this place, at this time.

Our text this morning, the opening verses of the letter to the Ephesians, also explores questions of church identity, but instead of focusing on the particularity of a single congregation, it takes a universal perspective as it reflects on the Church and its unity. These first few verses discuss membership and how we might think about that in relationship to God and one another. It likens us to one, large, adopted family with God as our parent and each other as siblings.

In the interest of full disclosure, I have to say that adoption is an image that leaps off the page for me, because both my sons are adopted, and that makes this especially meaningful for me. "God destined us to be his adopted children, because of God's love." I love this idea, and I especially love it when it's embedded in a passage like our text from Ephesians, where it is accompanied by verbs that indicate that our adoption is a form of God's blessing. God chose and destined us in Christ. By bringing us into the family of faith, God honors or praises God's own grace by making us sisters and brothers of one another, God's own children.

God destined us to be his/her adopted children. I love this idea. At the same time, I recognize that for many people, including my own family, the metaphor of adoption is a complicated one. One thing that makes it complicated is that adoption always involves loss, at least it does in our context. Whether it is the loss that the birth parent experiences when relinquishing a child, or the loss an adoptive child experiences by not being able to know one's birth parents as parents, or the loss the adoptive parents experience through their infertility, adoption is a loss. Everybody in the complicated relationship of adoption loses something.

In this complicated process of loss and gain, adoption reconfigures our most primary relationships and changes how we understand ourselves. It changes our identity. In adoption, we lose a little bit of who we are, or who we might have become, and we become someone different. Maybe that different is better - in many cases it is - but however better it may be, becoming someone different doesn't change the fact that something precious has been lost along the way. Adoption is an emotionally complicated metaphor, and, if we are going to use it, we need to acknowledge its difficulties.

I'm not sure that our emotional complications are what the author of Ephesians has in mind when he writes that God adopts us into the Christian family. In fact, I think the author is trying to look at the positive aspects of adoption, which are also very real. Adoption may be a loss, but it's also the formation of a new family, a family formed by intentional choice, conscious decision, and, in some cases, deliberate and persistent effort.

Many of you have probably had the experience of adopting a pet. For some of us this is accidental - a stray comes by and we take it in. But for many of us, pet adoption is a more deliberate process. We make a decision to adopt, go to the animal care center, pick out the pet we want, and then jump through the requisite hoops.

The last time we adopted cats, I had to produce written proof that I had Tony's permission. He was out of town, and they didn't trust my word that "Yes, of course he wants new cats!" They had to hear it directly from him. This is a big deal. When we adopt a pet, we choose to bring a creature into the intimate space of our family, and we make a commitment to care for it.

And, when things work out as we hope, we form relationships with our pets. We love them, and, in their fashion, they love us in return. They become part of our family. We had a cat once who was like a reincarnated, kind grandmother. She sat at the dinner table with us in an empty chair; she never ate - she just sat there and kept us company. And when we went to bed at night, she went from room to room as if she were saying goodnight to each of our children and to us. It was very dear. Our current cats are family members in different ways. Many of you have had similar experiences with your own adopted pets. They are knit into the fabric of your everyday lives.

I doubt the author of Ephesians ever had pets, and he would probably cringe to hear me using such a prosaic example to talk about the family of faith, but be that as it may, when this author writes about adoption, he describes the way God intentionally brings people into the Christian family and loves them as God's own; they become God's own. And I'm not just talking about people in the abstract sense. I'm talking about you. You who are gathered here, each one of you. And me. God has made a commitment to bring each one of us into the family of faith. God has made a commitment to bring us into God's everyday life and be a parent to us. That is what we affirm with every baptism we perform. It's also what we affirm every time we pray, "Our Father, who art in heaven." When we baptize and pray, we claim God's loving commitment. We are children of God, and sisters and brothers of Jesus himself. "God destined us to be [God's] adopted children."

To use the pet example again, we may be different - cats and dogs and birds and fish. We may come from different backgrounds; we may have varied skills and interests, but the author of Ephesians thinks we all belong in God's loving embrace, because God has made it so.

This is God's blessing to us, says Ephesians. Like other blessings in the Bible, for example the one God gives to Abram and Sarai in Genesis 12, being blessed implies mutual responsibility. Not only does God bless those whom God chooses, but God blesses them that they might be a blessing to others. The author of Ephesians affirms this. At the end of today's text, he says we are called to be an honor to God's glory.

Adoption is a two-way street, even if we were adopted as babies, before we could make a conscious choice about being part of a family. Ultimately, being adopted draws us into that decision; it requires us to say "yes" or "no" to the family into which we have been adopted. It invites us not only to receive love, but also to love in return.

George Eliot writes about this in one of her books that no one reads anymore, *Felix Holt, the Radical*. There she tells the story of Esther Lyon, a young woman who had been adopted at birth by a poor country pastor. Esther loved her father very much, but she hated being poor. She dreamed of what it might be like to be rich, and she imagined that her birth family was wealthy. She day-dreamed that she would be found by her first, rich family.

This being a novel, that's the way it went. She was found, and her family was rich, and Esther took up residence at the manor. Her new life was everything about which she had always dreamed - she had lots of food, clothes, privilege. Only one thing was missing: the people she loved. She found she couldn't have both worlds. She couldn't be fully a part of her adopted family and financially rich at the same time. Her adopted family was poor, and, if she was going to be a part of it, she had to be poor, too. She was forced to make a

decision, which, after a long struggle, she did. She decided to go home to her adopted father and say “yes” not just to him, but also to his life. It was a difficult decision for her. In making it she said, “It is not true that love makes all things easy; it makes us choose what is difficult.”<sup>1</sup>

I don’t know if Eliot meant to write a story about Christian identity and its dynamics; but I find that this story translates to the Christian experience as I understand it. When we are adopted into the Christian family and make a commitment to it, we say “yes” not just to God in Christ, but also to the life God calls us to live. Sometimes that life confronts us with decisions that are not easy, decisions informed by a love that makes us choose what is difficult. So, like Esther, maybe we choose to live a life of simplicity, or to throw our lot with the radicals of the world, or to turn our back on privilege and possibility, or to follow wherever else God in Christ might lead.

The point is, by grace, you and I are God’s adopted sons and daughters and we are called to live according to the values and possibilities of this new family. This gives shape not just to who we are, but also to who we shall be. May God bless this family of faith. May God bless our joys and struggles and decisions. And may God’s love surround and uphold us. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> George Eliot. *Felix Holt, the Radical*. Chapter 49.