

May 15, 2016

Second Reading: Romans 8:14-17

¹⁴For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ¹⁵For 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!" ¹⁶it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

In her wonderful spiritual memoir *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott says that she finally reached the point where the only two things she could pray were "Thank you!" and "Help!"

I feel her pain. Sometimes I walk around in a daze and my family overhears me mumbling, "Lord, have mercy!" (I'm old school.) "What's wrong?" they ask. "I have no idea," I say. "But it's the only thing I can think of at the moment." My hope is that at least I can remember this when I go into the nursing home. It's short, compact and covers a multitude of my sins. "Lord, have mercy."

The apostle Paul has a similar take on this terse way of praying. He says in our second reading from Romans that one benefit of being a baptized person is that we can "cry Abba! Father!" This works, too, I find: simply blurting out "Abba!" Doing so, Paul teaches, is the Spirit's work in us.

This prayer-provoking work of the Spirit, Paul goes on, is really a bearing witness to something: that we are God's children and have the privilege of approaching God in prayer. *Come to me anytime*, God says through the Spirit; *the door's always open; let's talk*.

Here I owe an apology to the Confirmation class, whom I misled some weeks ago in our session on the Lord's Prayer. Like many preachers, I told them that the word Abba was Aramaic for "Daddy." That's not exactly true. Abba is not baby talk, and it's not totally informal. When I e-mailed one of our Professors at the seminary about this, he confirmed my suspicion. "Abba," he wrote back, is the way one might address an elder in the family or tribe. It is a term of reverence and esteem. Still, it does imply a close, even affectionate relationship or bond, so that much is true. You feel you can always go to Abba.

My late father-in-law was a dad to me because my dad had died many years ago. As our relationship grew, I did what many people do in their families. I

started addressing him as dad or pop. It came naturally, though he was not a father by blood. So, we became close, but I still would not dream of calling him by his first name, Bill. He was dad. Not Abba exactly, but you get the idea.

The extraordinary thing, the apostle Paul promises, is that when we cry Abba we are being drawn into Christ's whole life, his victory *and* his sufferings. We cannot opt out of the one or the other. If you desire to rise with Christ, be ready to be buried with him! There is no glory without the grave.

In the original Pentecost story from Acts, the Holy Spirit shakes things up and causes some wonderful commotion. Gusts of wind and tongues of fire fill the place of worship. This teaches us, as a lady once reminded me going out of church some years ago, that, as she said, "Pastor John, the Holy Spirit has a way of taking you out of your comfort zone."

Could it be that one reason talk about the Holy Spirit puzzles us is that we tend to like things just the way they are. Change gives us the jitters. But if we want to know what it is like to be truly Spirit led, causing a ruckus is a small price to pay. At least we come to realize the truth that we are not in control, but that, thankfully, God is!

For several years, a morning dove would perch on the peak of our neighbor's house across the street. When I would get up early on Sunday, I would stand outside and listen to it sing its morning song of praise. Perhaps foolishly, I began to imagine that I knew that bird and that it knew me. It was comforting.

That particular dove is gone now, but I know that it was a teacher standing as witness that a higher Spirit, indeed the Holy Spirit, has come upon us all and empowered us to cry out "Abba! Father!"

AMEN

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