

“Our Father”

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Romans 8:12-17

***“You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, ‘Abba, Father!’”
Romans 8:15***



I would like to begin this morning by drawing your attention to a painting by Rembrandt with which I think most of you are familiar. The painting is titled *Return of the Prodigal Son*. Rembrandt created this masterpiece toward the end of his life and career, likely within a couple years of his death in 1669. Rembrandt is of course attempting to visually capture the moment described by the words of Jesus in Luke 15:20 of the Parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger son returns to his father after disowning his family and living a life filled with ungodly, selfish, impulsive, immoral choices and plans to ask the father to let him work his way back into the household as a slave or servant, earning his keep. In verse 20 we read that “while he [the son] was a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him.” This is the moment that

Rembrandt captures in his painting. He creates a sense of stillness through his visual interpretation. Everyone is standing still observing a father’s love for his son. The father and the son dominate the painting as they are seen in the foreground. The father leans over embracing his son. The son leans into his father. The undeniable compassion and love of a father for his son.

When we reflect on Rembrandt’s painting of the return of the prodigal son the point of Jesus’ parable soon becomes very clear. It is not really about the younger son at all. Neither is the parable about the older son. The parable is about a loving, forgiving, and compassionate father who makes a claim on a sorrowful son, a contrite child. A father who refuses to let anything else define his relationship with his son. Not greed. Not pride. Not self-centeredness. Not licentious living. Not immaturity, misguidedness, or youthful rebellion. The father’s loving, forgiving, and compassionate character compels him to simply embrace his repentant son and welcome him back into the household.

I began the sermon by bringing your attention to Rembrandt’s painting of the return of the prodigal son and the undeniable depiction of a father’s love, compassion, and forgiveness in defining his relationship with his wayward son. I began this way because St. Paul points to the love, compassion, and forgiveness of our Heavenly Father in the epistle lesson we heard this morning that is the basis for our sermon. The apostle makes it undeniably clear that as baptized, believing Christians we are first and foremost sons and daughters of our Heavenly Father, children of God. In his love, compassion, and forgiveness, the father has claimed us as his own with a love so strong that no greed, pride, self-centeredness, licentious living, immaturity, misguidedness, nor youthful rebellion can alter or change his Christ-centered, loving, compassionate, and forgiving character and disposition towards us.

Paul reminds us of the father's love, compassion, and forgiveness toward us in this short section of his letter by reminding us of our identity. He reminds us of our identity in two ways. First, he says that you and I are sons and daughters, children of God who have received the Spirit of adoption. This reminder of our identity keeps us grounded in the present, in our present lives here in this world. Second, Paul says that you and I are heirs. If we are sons and daughters of God, children of God who have received the Spirit of adoption, then we also are heirs and have an inheritance in heaven waiting for us. This points us to the future and gives us hope as we live in the present.

First, Paul can say we are sons and daughters. He contrasts this identity with that of slavery. We are sons and daughters, not slaves. If we return to the story of the prodigal son on which Rembrandt based his painting, we find that the son had the wrong understanding of his identity. Whether intentionally or unintentionally the younger son in the parable acted as though he was a slave and that determined his relationship with his father. He acted as though he were his father's hired servant who had merely a business relationship with his father. His inheritance was seen as compensation for performing the hard work and labor as a son. So as soon as the son decided it was time to collect his compensation and stop "laboring" as a son, he asked for his wages and cut ties with his "employer-father." The younger son had to learn that he was a son and not a slave. We call this learning process repentance. It was the Father's love and action, so beautifully illustrated by Rembrandt, that brought the son to repentance and a change of heart and mind in which he saw himself as a son.

So Paul says to us that as baptized Christians, as children of Christ and the Spirit, we did not receive the Spirit of slavery but of adoption. On the one hand, the spirit of slavery leads us to see ourselves as slaves to the desires of the world and leads to rebellion against God, our Father. The spirit of slavery leads us to see God not as a loving, compassionate, and forgiving father but as a capricious, strict, kill-joy taskmaster who simply will not let us do what we want to do with *our* bodies, and *our* time, and *our* money. The spirit of slavery leads us to the wrong understanding of our identity with God, the Father. We see God as a boss or a master or an employer rather than a father and so we cut ties and seek another boss, master, or employer. We disregard God's Word and Will as having any claim or authority over us. Paul claims that we so often end up serving a master he calls "the desires of the flesh" or the "passions of the world."

In contrast Paul is saying that as baptized Christians we have put on Christ. You are in the Spirit. That is our identity. We may become prodigals who "sell ourselves" over to serve another master by giving into the desires of the flesh but there is an opportunity for repentance. There is an opportunity to receive God's forgiveness, trust in him alone, and remember who we are as his baptized, believing children. This reminder of our identity keeps us grounded, living as the repentant children of God even as the desires of the flesh and passions of the world war strongly against us.

Paul also tells us that if we are sons and daughters, children of God, then we are also heirs. Being an heir and having the promise of an inheritance in heaven gives us the certainty and assurance that we are God's. He has claimed us to be his own. This reminder of our identity points us to the future. It points us to the return of Christ, our brother. This reminder of our identity gives us hope as we live in the present.



I would like to return to the Rembrandt painting that we saw at the beginning of the sermon. We see the Father's loving, compassionate, and forgiving character in his embrace of a lost, confused, struggling son. Rembrandt seems to know all too well that this is how you and I as Christians can often feel as we seek to live as sons and daughters, as heirs of God in the present even as we live in hope of our future promise and inheritance in heaven. I think that this is why he paints the son in the particular way that he does. He is weary. He only has one shoe. His clothes are torn. He leans into his father in a state of exhaustion. The world has worn him down. His rebellion against his Father has worn him down and literally brought him to his knees. He has tried life as a slave to the desires of the flesh and the ways of the world. He has tried to be his own

authority, make his own rules. He had tried to live as an orphan. It did not work. And so he returns to the loving embrace of his father who once again declares him to be his son. He reclaims him. He takes him in. He forgives him. He shows him compassion. He loves him. He discovers freedom in living as a son.

So how do we continually live in freedom as repentant children and heirs of our Heavenly Father as so beautifully pictured by Rembrandt? I think the words of Martin Luther are helpful as he explains in his *Small Catechism* what it means to call upon God as "Our Father." He says it means that we "believe that he is our true Father and that we are his true children, so that with all boldness and confidence we may ask him as dear children ask their dear Father." Living as a child and heir of God means praying to our God and speaking to him as if we are his children and heirs. The Christian faith is best put into action through the practice of prayer. In prayer to our Heavenly Father we as his children confess, repent, thank, ask, and even cry out at times in frustration, anger, or lament. After all, as St. Paul reminds us each individually in his letter, "You have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba, Father!'" So help us, dear Father. Amen.