

*So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. 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, and 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.*

*I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies. For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

As Pastor Wayne reminded us last week, one of the Apostle Paul’s techniques in his letter to the Romans is to repeat the same idea several times while using different terms to make the same point. These terms are often presented in contrasting pairs: righteousness and unrighteousness, law and grace, living under the law of sin and living under the law of God, and flesh and spirit.

Hearing these pairings contrasted over and over, it can be easy for us to fall into the trap of assuming Paul is offering a series of choices, that this is a list of either/or options for life. But Paul isn’t using these terms to describe alternatives; he’s using them to describe the reality of living in the in-between time, this liminal space we inhabit, between the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the time when Christ will come again. We Lutherans call this both/and language, or the already/not yet nature of the kingdom, and here in the middle of Romans chapter 8 we find some of the clearest examples of Paul speaking in these terms. Paul isn’t offering choices but rather describing the reality of life in this overlapping time when God has already fulfilled promises and made all things new in Jesus Christ, and when that new creation is not yet fully revealed until the time Christ comes again.

It starts off right where we pick up in Romans 8: Paul sums up everything he’s said so far in this letter by saying we are debtors. But instead of then launching into a list of things we ought to be doing to work off our debt to God, repaying God for all the promises made and fulfilled for us, Paul makes a startling claim: we are also inheritors. God who has already given us so much commits to giving us still more! We who cannot repay even what has already been done for us continue to receive even more. We are inheritors -- joint heirs with Jesus Christ. All that belongs to God belongs to Christ, and, Paul says, all that belongs to Christ also belongs then to us. With Christ, through Christ, we are part of God’s family. We have been adopted into God’s family; we are God’s heirs, God’s children.

This too is a remarkable claim. Remember that the community to whom Paul is writing is one made up of people of different backgrounds – some of the Christians were from a Jewish background, and some of them were from Gentile backgrounds (“Gentile” meaning everyone who isn’t Jewish). Perhaps the Jews were taken aback by this claim of their adoption into God’s family, believing themselves to have been born into God’s family and so have a unique status. Perhaps the Gentiles, newer to the congregation, wondered whether as adopted children they had the same gifts and responsibilities as those who had been part of God’s family much longer. Paul says to all of them, and all of us, we have all received the same spirit of adoption, and the same gift of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who leads us and guides us, even leading us in prayer as we call out to God. And even in our prayers, Paul notes, there might be evidence of different backgrounds – as children of God, the Spirit leads us to cry out “Abba! Father!” – two different parental terms that both identify us as children of God. “Abba” is the Aramaic word for father, and “father” here translates the Greek word. Even more than that though, “Abba” is the word Jesus used while

praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, calling out to God that there might be some other way to accomplish God's purposes, that the cup might pass from him. "Abba" more accurately is translated "Daddy" – a tender word of intimacy that young children use; calls of "Abba" and "Amma" are still heard in the streets of the Holy Land today as children call out for their parents. "Father" may more clearly reflect the formal reality of our status as inheritors of a particular kind of future. So then and now, among those who hear Paul's words to the Romans, there may be those who prefer tender words and those who prefer more formal words; we may cry out in different languages; we may have different images of just how God relates to us; but the same Spirit is given to us all and joins us to God's family from many different backgrounds. This is something that happens to us, not something we do. This is something God does – not a choice we make but a reality chosen for us, made real in us and around us. The same Spirit reminds us that we are already God's adopted children, and dwells with us while we still wait for adoption. The same Spirit assures us that God who has provided faithfully and generously in the past will also do so in the future. It's why God sent Jesus in the past and why God sends the Spirit now to assure us of the future.

All of which sounds lovely, of course, but what about now? What about this in-between time when sin and death still have a hold on us and the world around us, when God's kingdom is not yet fully revealed?

Now, says Paul, now there is sometimes suffering and agony and uncertainty. And not only in us but also in the whole creation. Now creation groans, and we the church groan. But this groaning is not just any kind of groaning; it is the groaning of labor pains. A sign that the new creation is not yet here but it is most certainly about to be revealed. Now we and all creation eagerly anticipate this revealing, waiting expectantly with creation to be set free and made whole; waiting for the revealing of the children of God and for the redemption of our bodies.

This is important: what we wait for is the redemption of our bodies. God did not send Jesus to swoop down and pluck us out of creation; Jesus took on our flesh and dwelled among us. God does not send the Spirit to sweep us out of this reality and into some other one. God sends the Spirit to dwell within us, and transform us – transform our very bodies, this very flesh, and in transforming us also transform the whole creation. The promise we receive is at once personal – "for you" – and cosmic. Over and over again in Scripture we hear this. We heard a couple weeks ago in our Old Testament reading, that Abraham would be father of many nations, and through him all nations would be blessed. Today in our Old Testament reading we heard that promise repeated to his grandson, Jacob: his family shall be blessed and through him and all the families of the earth will be blessed. God's promise, already fulfilled, for you, for us and for all, is yet still being revealed.

God's kingdom is here and now, God's spirit is transforming us here and now, God's new creation is not quite yet visible but is surely just about to be. And the new creation being brought forth by God can't be stopped by us or anything in creation – more about that next week! Now, we stand assured of our identity as children of God – debtors, yes, and also heirs – and assured also of our secure future. Because of the Spirit's assurances, we can live fully in this in-between present, following the Spirit's lead. We have been adopted, and we wait for adoption. We were saved in hope, and we eagerly anticipate seeing that for which we hope. With all creation we groan and eagerly anticipate the revealing of all that God has done and is doing and will surely do. Thanks be to God!