

Adopted into Oddness *Galatians 4:4-7 and Luke 1:46-55*

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God sent his Son...so that we might receive adoption as children. (Gal. 4:5)

In September of 1985 our first child was born. We named her Hannah, which means “grace.” Later that fall (October 20th to be precise), we placed her up for adoption. A pastor poured water over her head in church one Sunday and said something like, “Once you were just a Honeycutt, but now you’re adopted into a much larger family—the family of God which stretches with a strange genealogy farther than you can possibly see. These odd ones are your kin now. You’ll be sent to odd places one day. Welcome.”

Several years passed. Cindy and I were sitting around the kitchen table. Hannah played with the black cat at our feet. (Every minister needs a black cat.) We’d been praying, asking God to guide and help us as we made decisions about a second child. We heard about a little girl in an orphanage in El Salvador as war raged around the countryside there. Cindy scheduled a flight with the only ticket we could afford. With a set of details that could only have been orchestrated by the Holy Spirit, we adopted Marta in December of 1988. Exactly a month later, we placed her up for adoption again. The pastor said something like, “Once you were a Salvadoran, and then just a Honeycutt, but now you’re adopted into a much larger family—the family of God which stretches farther than you can possibly see. These odd ones are your kin now. You’ll be sent to odd places one day. Welcome.”

I was bicycling one May on the Blue Ridge Parkway with my cycling pals before the advent of cell phones. A ranger stopped me on a long climb. I was glad to stop, winded, but thought someone back home had died. “Are you Frank Honeycutt?” asked the ranger. I nodded yes. “Your wife wants you to call her.” I rode to the nearest telephone. It all came at once. “The birth mother cannot keep the little boy. He’s biracial—black father, white mother. It’s a very small town. We need to make a decision in the next week. She’s in her last trimester.” We drove to Tennessee to a small town near Nashville in early July of 1991 and picked Lukas up at the hospital. He was four days old at the time of his adoption. A little over a month later, we placed him up for adoption again. The pastor in church that Sunday said something like, “Many people will want to define you by your race or by your last name, but now by water and the word, you’re adopted into a much larger family—the family of God. These odd ones are your kin now. And you’ll be sent to odd places one day. Welcome.”

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In today’s reading from the Book of Galatians, Saint Paul writes these words to a very young church: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption* as children.”

In just a few minutes in this church, Annalise and Joseph will be baptized—ad-

opted into the family of God. What a great day this is for them, a day to be celebrated and remembered. But we need to be clear what precisely it is we are celebrating and what we're called to remember.

There is still a fair amount of superstition surrounding baptism in our culture. Any pastor can probably recall an urgent phone call from a frightened mother wanting to know, "Can you do my baby?" Pour a little water, say a few words, and provide a talisman of protection from all mishap and evil. It's interesting in the gospels that the baptism of Jesus does not protect him from evil; rather, it *hastens* his encounter with such. Nary a verse separates the baptism of Jesus and his encounter with Satan in the wilderness. You'll hear the very old renunciations of evil in the baptismal liturgy in just a few moments. And in some ways, these words will sound archaic and passé. But they reflect a conviction that baptism has as much to do with this life as the next. Baptism sends us into the world to some very odd (and even dark) places. "In battle we'll engage," writes Luther in his famous hymn.

But to just stick with the single baptismal image of adoption, in baptism, we still have earthly parents, but the primary parent becomes God the Father. In baptism, we still have family stories, but the main story from which we find meaning and truth is from the Bible. In baptism, we might have brothers and sisters and live in a house, but our primary family is the household of God. In baptism, we may speak English (or another language), but the adopted will listen for God's voice and God's peculiar language for guidance. As one theologian puts it, "When children are adopted, they take on new parents, new siblings, new names, new inheritances—in short, a new culture."¹

I'm afraid we either get this as church people, or we don't. Or maybe we don't want to get it. Mary is pregnant in our gospel lesson with the Son of God. And as a result of this pregnancy, she sings a terrifically powerful, yet potentially threatening song. The proud are scattered. The powerful are brought down. The lowly are lifted up. The hungry are filled. The rich are sent away empty. This is the work of the One to be born. And this is the work of all who are adopted and re-born in baptism.

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I watched the stock market zoom up and down this week. I'm 54 years old and need to watch these things, I suppose. So I watched it up and down and with it my own ELCA Board of Pensions Retirement holdings. Several times during the week I mentally recalculated at what age I might retire. And then I caught myself. And I prayed a prayer of confession (a lengthy one) that I have a house and food and transportation and blessings too many to name. And I asked for forgiveness. And a kick in the pants.

You see how this works? To be about this work Mary sings about, we will need a *much larger family* than a single household living at a certain address. To be about this work, we will need a *much larger story* than the one contained in a genealogy spanning a couple of generations of blood kin. To be about this work, we'll need a *much larger God* than one we sometimes claim loves our nation most and best. To be about this work, we need *baptism* and a renewed understanding of what it is and is not. We are adopted in the sacrament into a new family. We are adopted into God's agenda outlined in the Magnificat. We are adopted into the upside-down Kingdom of God.

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Some unsolicited advice:

If you don't want to grow up and become rather strange and out of step, I suggest you stay away from the waters of holy baptism. If you're uncomfortable making God your primary allegiance rather than, say, a flag or nation state, it might behoove you to think twice about life around a font. If you're nervous about giving sacrificially of your time and money in an uncertain economy, then maybe you will want to rethink this baptism stuff.

For Mary says that her soul "magnifies" the Lord—makes him larger in her own life. Beware of the magnification of God. I suppose we can choose to minimize (rather than magnify) the Lord even if the adoption certificate has already been issued.

But you know, God is relentless about following and guiding his children and finding room in our lives. God is used to getting his way. So hear the promise this day: *Once you were only a Fuller...once you were solely a Sorenson, but now you're adopted into a much larger family—the family of God which stretches farther than you can possibly see. These odd ones are your kin now. You'll be sent to odd places one day. Welcome, Annalise. Welcome, Joseph.*

Notes

1 Rodney Clapp, *A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), p. 100.