

January 4, 2009
The Federated Church of Hyannis
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MENTIONED IN THE WILL

Ephesians 1:3-14

Recently I met a woman in the grocery store who works for an animal rescue league. She told me stories of abandoned dogs and offered to get yet another West Highland Terrier. With the economy the way it is, more and more people are turning in dogs to rescue shelters to be adopted. But adopting these dogs is not so easy.

If you were to show up at a pet store in the mall and handed them cash you could have the dog of your choice, no questions asked except questions about things they might sell you. But if you want to adopt an animal from a shelter, questions are asked. I have had to provide character references for church members trying to adopt dogs. Sometimes home visits are involved. Adopting a dog can be a lot more difficult than buying a dog.

When Elise and I were seeking to have children we found that adopting can be a lot more difficult than having children by birth. In the latter case you basically just need good timing, but to adopt children is generally an arduous process and often very costly. The conception of a child takes a moment in time. The adoption of a child can take years. There are certain costs to conceiving and giving birth. Adopting a child can add the cost of agency fees and sometimes the cost of travel to foreign countries.

To give birth to a child you do not have to prove your fitness as parents. You don't have to go through home visits and layers of approval from agencies and sometimes from foreign bureaucracies. And you don't have to go through psychological exams. But to adopt you have to prove you aren't crazy to adopt. How many of you birth parents had to prove you weren't crazy before you had kids?

Paul said that we have all been born of the flesh. We have also been chosen for adoption by our God. We were born in nature but God wills us to be reborn in spirit. To become adopted by God involves only God's good pleasure. We were not chosen because of some good deeds we have done, some doctrine of faith we affirmed, some words of prayer we uttered, some church we joined, some gift we have given. Before we were born, even at the foundation of the world we were chosen. Our fitness is not at issue.

God's grace is. We have been redeemed by the sacrifice of Christ, and in good measure that is what this passage is all about: being chosen.

As we collectively mourn the end of the season for our New England Patriots, I would like to tell something of the story of former NFL quarterback Fran Tarkenton and his sense of being chosen. For many years he was the scrambling quarterback of the Minnesota Vikings and before that the University of Georgia. He was one of the most prolific passers in NFL history. The son of a minister, Tarkenton has always had a good sense of who he is.

Tarkenton became chosen as starting quarterback when the University of Georgia was playing the University of Texas. At the time Tarkenton was the third-string quarterback on Georgia's team with no one predicting he would advance beyond that lowly position. In this particular game Georgia was having a difficult time moving the ball. Late in the third quarter they did not have a single first down. They were backed up near their own end zone. It was third down.

Suddenly, this young third-string quarterback started out onto the field. No one had told him to go into the game. However, no one tried to stop him either. The first-string quarterback saw Tarkenton heading to the huddle and assumed that the coach had decided to replace him, so he trotted off the field. Tarkenton took charge, led the team down the field for a touchdown, and, as they say, the rest is history. He went on to have one of the most remarkable careers the sports world has ever seen. It started when he believed he was chosen.

When Kristy and I talked about an appropriate anthem for this Sunday, she asked, "Will there be any mention of the 3 wise men, anything about the star, or Epiphany or anything about the year end?" No, I explained, it is about adoption and I know it is difficult to find anthems that have to do with adoption so good luck.

Fundamentally that is what this passage is about from beginning to end. After the opening words of praise to God Paul talks of us, who are born of the flesh, being adopted as the spiritual heirs of God, of the God whose will it is to choose us and what we receive by the will of God. This is the promise of our future – our destiny. It is the plan of God for the fullness of time to be adopted by him.

Under Roman law, adoption was a serious step. Copper money and scales were used. The biological father would put the child to be adopted on the scales and the adopting father would balance the scales with the child's weight in copper coins. That payment was the first step. Then the adopting father had to go to the magistrate and plead his case for adoption. When the adoption was completed, the adopted child had all the rights of inheritance of the new family. All the child's debts and obligations connected with the previous family were abolished, stricken from the records, as if they had never existed.

Something children who have been adopted can tell you is that once you are adopted it no longer much matters that you have been adopted. You receive the same love and care as those children who have been naturally born. You have the same kinds of things expected of you – good table manners and doing your homework and respecting the family name. But one thing is different – you know that you were chosen. You became part of a family because the family chose you. It is not a matter of biology or genealogy but choice.

In Reader's Digest years ago, a contributor told of his Aunt Ruby and Uncle Arnie who had adopted a baby boy after five years of trying unsuccessfully to conceive. As often happens, much to their surprise, a short time after the adoption, Aunt Ruby discovered she was pregnant, and she later gave birth to a boy. One day when the two boys were eight and nine years old, the teller of the story was visiting Aunt Ruby, and a woman in the neighborhood came to visit. Observing the children at play, the woman asked, "Which boy is yours, Ruby?" "Both of them," Aunt Ruby replied. The caller persisted. "But I mean, which one is adopted?" Aunt Ruby did not hesitate. She looked straight at her guest and replied, "I've forgotten."

God has chosen each of us to be part of the household of faith. This is not because we are good but because God is good. It is not something earned, it is something given. It is not by our will but by the will of God that we are his people. This is a promise greater than any promised inheritance we could ever hope for – to be God's own people.

A material inheritance is fleeting. Some years ago I found myself on a cold, windy hillside conducting a funeral for a woman who was an heiress to a pharmaceutical fortune. There on that chilly hillside with me were the funeral director, her attorney, and one curious neighbor who wondered what happened to her jewelry. There is an inheritance that passes away, not always passing to those we love.

Paul gives focus to what we are to inherit from God, not just what we see before us at the moment. A pastor tells of calling on a wealthy businessman who was dying. The man shared with the pastor one of his greatest regrets. Years earlier, he had been asked to teach a Sunday School class for young boys. At the time, the businessman saw this opportunity as an interruption to his schedule. He preferred to spend his spare time on his business.

In the intervening years, he had amassed much wealth. But he lost the chance to invest in the lives of those children. It turned out that he made a poor choice. His business was now declining and his wealth was nearly wiped out. His influence on those boys' lives, however, would have lived on eternally.

How could it be that the Lord who created the heavens and the earth could stoop to give us an inheritance that is unfading? Paul states that this is the mystery of God, so if I am making it too clear I am probably doing it wrong. It is a mystery, and we have to make room for things we cannot explain and things we cannot understand but things that we can accept and things for which we give God thanks. From the beginning God chose us and in our failures chooses to redeem us.

Mark Twain once remarked, "Don't expect too much of human beings. We were created at the end of the week when God was tired and looking forward to a day off." Except that we have been created in the very image of God and even before our birth God set out to adopt us as his own.

I can tell you that when you adopt children you expect no less of them than if they are born to you. If you adopt children you do not love them less if they are taller, darker and more handsome and more athletic and smarter and had more friends by the time they were in junior high than I had in my whole lifetime. When children are your children you still expect them to go to church with you and do their homework and help you program the VCR and explain once again how to use your new cell phone because you can't figure it out for the life of you. Finally all that really matters is the choice you made and bond of love between you. Thanks be to God.

Blessed are you, O God, for you have made us your children. You have brought us here to worship you and given us the confidence of your salvation. Teach us your truth, and send your Holy Spirit upon us this day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.