

“Growing as Children of God”  
Romans 8:12-17  
June 11, 2006

The Rev. Christine Chakoian  
First Presbyterian Church  
Lake Forest, Illinois

“In the early spring of 1958 Bobby Kingsley broke into [my] Pappy’s store,” begins my friend Jim Lowry’s story. Jim is a pastor from the southern branch of our Presbyterian family, from South Carolina to be exact. This story happens to be not only true but also factual, though the names have been changed to protect the not-so-innocent, though I have to say that, this being a story from rural South Carolina, the original names are just as improbable as those substituted here.

“In the early spring of 1958,” Jim Lowry says, “Bobby Kingsley broke into [my] Pappy’s store. It happened in the dark of night. I remember it was the spring of 1958 because that’s the year Sparky graduated from MIT and I graduated from Grand Forks High School. Sparky is my older brother.

“Soon after midnight on the night in question, Pappy got a call from Fred Nolty, the chief of police in our little town. ‘Lowry,’ said Fred Nolty ..., ‘Gopher Harlan caught Bobby Kingsley in your store. Gopher was on routine patrol ....’ Fred liked to use terms like *routine patrol* because it made him sound like Sergeant Joe Friday on *Dragnet*.... ‘Gopher Harlan was on routine patrol and when he rode by your store he seen what looked like a flashlight shining inside the winder. When he checked it out he seen Bobby Kingsley in there and caught him red handed looking through the merchandise just like he was on a shopping spree or something.

“‘You know Bobby Kingsley’ Fred went on. ‘He’s one of Betty Jo Kingsley’s boys. God knows who his daddy is.’ Betty Jo Kingsley was a well-known [working-girl] in business out on Reynolds Road. ‘I see,’ said Pappy. ‘How old did you say the boy is?’ ‘I didn’t say,’ said Fred Nolty again trying to sound like Sergeant Joe Friday. He looks to be about 11 or 12 years old. ... He didn’t know exactly.’

“‘I see,’ Pappy said. Pappy often said *I see*. I think he said it because he really did see and because it gave him a chance to think for a second or two before he spoke further. ‘What’d you do with him?’ Pappy asked. ‘Took him to Paxton to the county jail.’ ‘I see.’”

Fred Nolty was a good and decent man, and in many ways a fine Christian. He did not, however, that night in the spring of 1958, understand what it means that we are all children of God.

Last week on Pentecost, we celebrated the “birth” of the church, our origins born of the wind and fire and very breath of God. As I said then, this is a fairly radical claim: as the Christmas story is the account of the Holy Spirit coming upon Mary, giving birth to the person of Jesus Christ, so also the Pentecost story is the parallel story of the Holy Spirit coming upon *us*, who grow into the body of Christ. This means that we are, as St. Paul tells us, “children of God, heirs with Christ,” offspring of the Spirit.

Today I want to explore what happens to after that spiritual birth, what it means to grow as children of God.

I submit that just as there’s a balance of nature vs. nurture in our human growth, so also there’s a balance in our spiritual development. Our Christian nature includes particular Spiritual gifts – just as our human nature includes particular traits and abilities. What *happens* to those gifts, however, makes an enormous difference. If we ignore them, dismiss them, smother them, or simply let them atrophy, our spiritual gifts will die. But if our gifts are nurtured -- if our spiritual gifts are nurtured, they will flourish and grow, they will shine with the brightness of Christ himself.

And how are our spiritual gifts nurtured? Just like our human gifts: in a family. Just as the well-being of a child is made or broken by the family in which he or she is raised, so also the well-being of a Christian is made or broken by the *church* family in which he or she lives.

First, a little excursus on language. Note in our Scripture reading this morning that Paul tells us that we have been brought into this family by “adoption.” Now that’s a curious word, and it bears a closer look. Bear with me. It’s frustrating that English can’t render the Greek in our Scripture

reading more completely than “adoption.” Adoption was uncommon in Jewish households, but in Greco-Roman law, adoption came in many shapes and sizes – like adoption that made someone a household’s permanent servant; or adoption that took in a child, but without inheritance rights. The word Paul chooses here was only for *slaves*, who were, by poverty or birth, another’s property. The *only* way slaves could be freed was if someone bought their freedom for them, that is, purchased their redemption. The purchasing family then had a choice: they could own the slave, or they could set the slave free, or they could *adopt* the former slave as one of their own: make the former slave – child or adult – a full member of the family, without any distinction from a child by blood, including the family name and even inheritance rights. I love the way it’s rendered in Greek – say the Apollos family adopted a slave this way. That slave was given “child-of-Apollos-ness.” That kind of adoption was, needless to say, remarkable and rare.

Yet *this*, Paul says, is what we’ve received: the spirit of adoption, literally, *children-of-God-ness*. We were enslaved by the “spirit of the flesh,” enslaved by sin, by selfishness, by jealousy, by greed, by all the things that make us ugly and petty and small; enslaved even by death itself. But Christ bought our freedom for us. Now we are no longer indebted to the flesh, that creditor who exacted the price of death from us – because Christ has paid the redemption price on our behalf. And instead of being held in servitude to our new owner, or even being set free to make it by ourselves, we have been adopted as God’s own children. And *nothing* can threaten our adoption -- neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38-39). We need not be afraid anymore.

*That’s* what being children of God means. And more remarkably yet, we even have the privilege of welcoming others into God’s family.

“The next morning after Bobby Kingsley broke into Pappy’s store and Gopher Harlan hauled him off to the Paxton County Jail, we all got up as usual. Banks and I fed the livestock while Pappy shaved and Mom cooked breakfast. Banks is my younger brother. After breakfast, as

was his unshakable custom, Pappy read from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible ... [which] was yet in 1958 a little on the wild side. I don't remember exactly where he was reading at the time but I do remember on that morning he broke with his custom of reading straight through the Bible and skipped to Matthew 25. When he got to the place that says, 'I was in prison and you came to me,' he paused for a second and raised his left eyebrow as he was wont to do. Then, when he got to the place that says, 'In as much as you have done it to one of the least of these, my brothers, you have done it to me,' he stopped reading, raised his left eyebrow again, and led the family prayer. In addition to praying for Sparky at MIT, me and Banks in School, Mom in her teaching, and a half dozen or so others for whom he had particular concern, Pappy prayed that morning for Bobby Kingsley.

"After breakfast, Pappy got in his 1954 light green Chevrolet pickup truck and drove the 25 miles or so to the county seat. His old friend, Joe Davies, was the county judge in those days. Pappy drove straight to Judge Davies's house. 'Joe,' Pappy said, 'you've got an eleven or maybe twelve year old boy in your jail by the name of Bobby Kingsley. I want you to sentence him to live with me and Beck and the boys for a while.' 'He must have done something pretty bad,' Joe Davies ... said .... The judge knew well what life was like in our house. He had been there many times and as often as not he had his feet under my mother's table. Pappy didn't laugh. 'Gopher Harlan caught him in my store last night.' ...

"You just go down to the jail and get him,' said Joe Davies. 'I'll sign the order as soon as I get to my office.' ...

"That's the story of how Bobby Kingsley came to live with us pretty much full time from then until he graduated from Great Falls High School. The day Pappy brought him home, Bobby Kingsley didn't

have anything but a pair of high-water pants: No shoes, no shirt, no nothing except for one pair of high-water pants.”

That’s about the state we’re in when we enter the household of God. We *can’t* know right away how to act in our new family, and if we think we do we are just fooling ourselves. It’s like an international adoption, in which we need to learn the language, the culture, the household rules, everything about our new life. I’ve mentioned before our neighbors back in Clarendon Hills, the Spencers, who adopted two little girls from China: Amy at 20 months and, two years later, Suzy at 3 1/2. When Suzy was adopted, Amy wasted no time in showing her the ropes as part of the family. Suzy didn’t join her new family with a fully-formed understanding of what it meant to be a Spencer, but she learned. And she learned from her adopted sister. That’s how it is for us when we are adopted by God: we don’t start with a full understanding of what it means to be a Christian, but we learn. And we learn from our sisters and brothers in Christ, who welcome us in and show us the ropes.

A century ago, our denomination’s Book of Order called this one of the “Great Ends” of the church: “the shelter, nurture, and spiritual fellowship of the children of God.” Our Long Range Planning Council has chosen this as one of the three top priorities for our congregation: to provide spiritual nurture to each other. It happens already here in countless ways: in Friday morning Men’s Group, and the Wednesday women’s program; in Christian Perspectives and in Stephen Ministry; in youth group and the choir, and a thousand different places. And just as crucially, it happens outside of official channels, of course, too: when you notice a newcomer who’s on the edge of coffee hour; when you remember someone’s grief and loss a year after it’s happened; when you speak the truth in love with someone who is acting like a jerk at a meeting; when you pray for someone you do not know, but heard about in prayer concerns.

And as we learn here what it means to bear the name of “Christian,” what it means to grow as children of God; as we’re nurtured to express our spiritual gifts as fully as we can – why then, of course, we take these gifts

outside this place, and carry God's presence into the world, into our work, into our schools, into our neighborhood, into, even, our own family.

"Stories about Bobby Kingsley," my friend Jim Lowry concludes, "stories about Bobby Kingsley living with us are legion.

"My next to favorite story is about the time Bobby, who had never before been farther away from home than the county jail, drove with Pappy and Mom and Banks in Mom's 1956 Chevrolet all the way from Grand Forks, South Carolina, to Boston, Massachusetts, to see Sparky graduate from MIT. I stayed behind to tend the store and feed the livestock. I can only guess about what impression Bobby Kingsley left on Boston, but I do know when they got back from their adventure I asked Bobby what he liked most about Boston. He told me with great animation about how in Boston in the public bathrooms they have machines on the wall where all you have to do is push a button and hot air comes out to dry your hands. According to Bobby, in Boston, you can even turn the nozzle on those same machines so it will dry your face.

"That's my second favorite story about Bobby Kingsley. My absolute favorite is from many years later. It happened during Holy Week of 1990. We had gathered for Pappy's funeral. None of us had seen Bobby in many, many years; but somehow he heard about Pappy's death and showed up at our childhood home to grieve deeply with the rest of us. He had with him a wife and two boys. All the Kingsley's were dressed fashionably and tastefully. When one of Bobby's sons was about to touch one of Mom's figurines, the youngster looked to see if Bobby was watching. As it happened, Bobby was watching. Bobby didn't say a word. He just raised his left eyebrow.'" Amen.