



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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This God is with us! What do we do now?

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 27, 2015

The first Sunday of Christmas—Based on Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7, and John 1:1-19

This year one of the volunteers in the Soup Kitchen and his husband received the gift that will keep on giving. In September they had a child. For Christmas they posted on FaceBook a very delightful picture of the child's arms open wide with smiling face in front of a pile of toys much larger than their son. The picture is captioned, "They're all mine!"

When I was a child I loved the scripture readings like the one from the letter to the Galatians about adoption. Even the Gospel of John talks about our becoming children of God. This preference had nothing to do with the readings themselves but was, as they say, all about me. When I asked where babies came from my parents told me the adoption agency. And I believed them. It was a story that was meant to comfort me. They told of going down to the adoption agency and looking over all the children and picking out the best baby there, and for a while I believed the story. I believed it so much that once, when I was about six years old and I was having a sandbox conversation with other six year olds who thought they were experts in the origin of the species, I convinced all of them that their stories were a bunch of bunk. After all who had ever seen a stork in our suburban Baltimore neighborhood delivering a baby? And those other stories about loving each other and making a baby like baking a cake...I mean really? No, this was an easy sales job...after all, everyone by the age of six had gone shopping and watched as our parents picked out the very best head of iceberg lettuce or the perfect ears of corn. Then Joey's mom called my mom and told her that it was wonderful that I was so well-adjusted with the fact that I was adopted and that perhaps she should explain some other facts to me so that I would not be shocked when I learned that not all children are adopted.

As my mother struggled to find the right words to explain things to her precocious six year old, preacher, lawyer, or snake oil salesman—I still had not yet decided on a vocational path—her shame in talking about sex, talking about the fact that she had not been able to conceive, and about the lie she had told me made me feel something was wrong. Terribly wrong! I had never seen my mother ashamed, and I knew it was my fault and so I was as ashamed. I was as ashamed as Adam and Eve when they left the Garden of Eden.

In the early sixties, adoption was filled with such shame for all members of the adoptive triad: 1) birth parents—why did they have children they did not want or were not able to care for; 2) adoptive parents—why couldn't they conceive; what was wrong with them, anyway; and 3) adoptive children—how would we turn out. My initial shame only deepened when I realized that no matter how much my parents told me that they loved me and that I was chosen, in the end I was only available for adoption because another mother had rejected me. And so when I heard the Christmas lessons about becoming adopted children of God, I realized that adoption was not always shameful but rather a reward of baptism. I was not quite sure how that applied to me and all my shame, but it was comforting to hear that scriptures valued adoption and even used it to talk about the relationship between God and humanity. I had moved from the status of discarded baby to beloved child. It was a temporary comfort, and it took me many years, many loving people, and a lot of therapy to believe the beloved child part. I used to blame adoption for all of my troubles and especially for the fact that I did not feel loved. And then as I studied to be a priest and a social worker I realized that everyone has a story of what went wrong and why they are not loved. In fact the story of Adam and Eve being expelled from the Garden of Eden seems to me to be about the fact that we all feel ashamed and unloved. Somehow no one feels innately loved, and most of us are sure that we are at fault.

Last weekend Martin Sheen, the actor you may know from the movie “Apocalypse Now” and the television show “The West Wing,” was being interviewed by Krista Tippet. He said that what all of us “long for is a knowing that we are loved. The great challenge of any human life is to discover that one is loved.” In my experience this discovery can come from parents, it can come from a spouse or a friend, and for many people it comes from being parents and the giving and receiving of unconditional love between parents and children.

Thinking of all of this as I prepared this sermon led me to speculate a different way in which the adoption metaphor can be used to understand the Christmas story. After all, when God became human he did so in the person of the baby Jesus. In reality God is much more the child who doesn’t belong than the stern parent we so often have been told about. And if God is present in the person of the baby Jesus we are called with Mary and Joseph to adopt the baby Jesus and all that he will become without condition. In adopting the baby Jesus we not only are doing a good deed, but we can also begin to experience the unconditional love of this child for us and discover ourselves as loved no matter who we are or what we have done. Once we do realize that we are loved, everything is different. Martin Sheen observed that “knowing that we are loved despite ourselves unites us to all humanity and the universe. When we know that we are loved, we accept who we are and gain the strength to meet the world where it really is and the strength to make it even better.”

By thinking of ourselves as the adoptive parents of God rather than adopted children we can accept responsibility for Jesus and his message of love. Like anyone who accepts the responsibility of parenting, we are no longer free to live for ourselves alone; but we are more free because we live our lives for someone else. When we do realize that we are loved we become like children again. Now believing that we are loved, we discover ourselves full of wonder and awe at the amazing life we have been given.

Returning to the story of the volunteer and his posting the picture of the baby and his gifts with the caption, “They are all mine,” I realized that the baby may not be thinking of his presents at all but rather thinking that they, his gay dads, are all his. That is what Jesus might have thought as they gathered around him in the manger and still thinks today as we celebrate his birth. This is how we can look at the world: realizing that we are loved and we belong to everyone and everyone belongs to us, we gain the strength to meet the world where it really is and the strength to make it even better. May the light and love of God incarnate enkindled in our hearts shine forth in our lives and in our world today and forever more. Merry Christmas.