

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost • June 20, 2010

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Galatians 3:23-29

"Freedom: Adopted Into Freedom"

On first hearing, the story sounded like something of a fairy tale; but it wasn't. The child had been born on the street. No house, no nursery, certainly no baby shower or nice blankets. The child's father wasn't around – they never learned what became of him – and the mother fell ill and died when her offspring was still very young. The orphanage didn't turn out to be much of an improvement from living on the street, so the child ran away. That seemed like ages ago. Homeless, the child did whatever seemed necessary to survive, things that no one, let alone a child, should ever have to do. The city was an unforgiving place, and death seemed to be lurking just around the corners, out of sight most of the time, but never really out of mind. This was what they knew of the world.

But a day came that changed that child's life. Having learned a thing or two about taking what they'd like without paying for it, the youngster went into the farmer's market to appropriate some fruit to eat for the next couple of days. They'd done it any number of times before. By this point, they could grab most anything off a farmer's cart and have it in a pocket within a split second. This degree of skill was almost a point of pride: you'd have to be looking right at them and expecting it to happen if you hoped to catch them in the act. Little did the child know then, though, that the vendors had wisely decided to hire some security staff. One such guard was present that day. And he was looking right at the child, expecting them to make a move. Once the child had grabbed the fruit – a large pomegranate, it just so happens – the guard's hands were locked around the little one's shoulder and arm before they fruit had even hit the bottom of their pocket.

The next few days went by in a blur. Upon reviewing the child's case, the judge decided to send the child to reform school in the hope that a better future would await the youngster. And so, the next chapter of this life began on the day that they arrived at the front gate of the school's massive campus.

Life at the school – the colorfully-named "Mosaic Institute" – didn't seem so bad at first: food and a warm bed were a nice change of pace. The program had been established some years prior by a fantastically wealthy and generous patron who wanted to provide structure and guidance for the boys and girls who came into the school's care. The child, as a ward of the state, came under the authority of the school's headmaster. The headmaster was an honest and fair man, but he ran the school with strict conformity to the program's rules. The child soon learned that you always knew where you stood with the headmaster. If you followed all the rules – and there were a lot of rules – everything would be fine. When you didn't follow the rules, you went to see the headmaster. The child went to see the headmaster quite often.

Several years passed. The child was no longer still a child, but a young adult. And though the school had come to feel like a home, they knew that it wasn't. Though the painful memories of the past had faded somewhat, they vaguely recalled what it meant to live outside the school's walls, what it felt like to be free. You could go where you wanted to go, do what you wanted to do. You didn't have to follow a curriculum that planned out almost every hour of your day. But in order to leave the Mosaic Institute, to graduate from the program, you had to be able to live by all the rules. Unable to do so, this young person began to feel more and more like a prisoner. They continued to meet with the headmaster, to go to classes, to dream of life outside the school walls.

Not long thereafter, another student came to the school. Something was different about him, though. He didn't get placed at the Institute; he came because he wanted to. You see, this new student was the son of the school's founder. He went out of his way to get to know his classmates,

including that young person who'd had such a hard life before being sent to the school. They became friends – such good friends, in fact, that the son gave them a token of his friendship. It was a pendant, something that, he explained, his father had given to him. He went on to say that his father had extended an offer: he'd heard of this orphan through his son and decided to adopt them as his own child. Being a street-smart orphan, though, they knew that this had to be too good an offer to be true, so they went and checked with the headmaster. But to the orphan's amazement, the headmaster confirmed the founder's invitation. "What's more," he went on to explain, "your friend is going to take your place here." And he did. The founder's son followed all the Institute's rules and completed the program, flawlessly. When graduation day came, he gave his robe and diploma to his friend the orphan, saying, "These are yours now, too." At last, the orphan could leave the walls of the school behind, going back out into the world to experience the freedom of which they'd dreamed for so long. And though this young person entered those walls alone as an orphan, they departed having a father and a brother.

They wouldn't meet the founder for some time: he lived quite a far ways off. But he provided for his adopted child, giving them all that they needed to support the long journey to their new home. And so the child went, proudly wearing that pendant that marked them as a member of the family. In honor of the founder's son and everything that he had done, the child vowed to live like their friend, their brother: to be the kind of person that they knew they could be, conformed to the image of the founder's son. They decided to go out and show what their adopted father had done for them. And they did just that, enjoying a life of freedom, in service to others.

What was the child's name? What is your name? For *you* are that child.

I don't know what your family history might be, what kind of relationship you've had with your parents. I was blessed with loving parents who did the best that they could to raise me up: they provided, they cared, they nurtured, and they brought me to the Lord's house. But not everyone has had parents like that. It's possible that your relationship with your parents has been strained at times, or worse. Maybe you've wondered if they are, in fact, your parents, or if you've got other parents – better parents – somewhere out there who are waiting to receive you into their open arms.

What does it mean to be adopted? A number of households in our congregation know from firsthand experience. To be adopted is to be brought in and made a part of something. Adopted children can take comfort in the knowledge that their parents *chose* them and welcomed them into their family. They can see that they are wanted and loved by looking at their adoption certificate.

This Father's Day, as we celebrate fathers and those who have served in that role in our lives, we remember God our Father. God chose you. He is the one who gave His Son to live in your place and to go to your cross, who adopted you in Baptism and gave you a token of His love, so that you might know the life that He offers. He adopts you into freedom, freedom from the mistaken notion that if you follow enough rules you can make yourself a part of His family. It's not about the "if-then"; it's "because-therefore." This is what St. Paul shared with the Galatians to call them back from the errors into which they'd been led by false teachers. Because God sent His Son for us to follow all the rules, we are free, and therefore we can live as His children, part of His family. As Paul wrote, it doesn't matter who you are or where you're from; it doesn't matter who your parents might be. Male or female, slave or free, genetic descendent of Abraham or Gentile orphan, everyone can know the freedom that God offers, the salvation that He gives, so that one day, we will see Him face to face, and He will welcome us in as His beloved children.

Sound like a fairy tale? It's not.

Amen.