

“KEEP CHANGING”

Romans 8:12-17 May 27, 2018

This is a time of transition for both the clergy and for our daily lives. For many of the clergy in the United Methodist system of itineration it is a time when clergy and their families are packing up for a move. They are starting to say their good-byes in earnest, eyeing their shelves to figure how many book boxes they'll need this time, and perhaps checking out the parsonage to see what needs to be painted and repaired before they move again. They are still where they've been, physically, but psychically they're living in anticipation and maybe some dread about where they are going, how they will get there, and what comes next.

Thankfully we are not in that situation this year as I will continue my appointment here at Pine Bluffs UMC. But I know from some of your stories that you remember clergy leaving from here or coming here and some of what that entailed for all of you. United Methodist clergy who may be on the move aren't the only ones living into transition this time of year. Lots of families are, too. Schools have let out. Graduations happen. More marriages take place in June than in any other month of the year. It may be the time for the summer camp or work schedule, the first inklings of the empty nest, or the start of life together as a married couple and all the expense (and stress!) that often happens.

For many of us in the U.S., vacation season begins right about now. As you look around the sanctuary you will see that many familiar faces are missing and we can probably guess that they are on a Memorial Day long week-end somewhere having fun without us.

All of these transitions are happening about right now. So it's no wonder that many congregations start a summer schedule soon. We put our Sunday

School and Bible Study on hold until the fall and our committees try to have the least amount of meetings possible thru the summer. Our activities are curtailed as we take a break from the routine and seek the summer pace of more leisure & less routine obligations (at least some of us anyway).

What does all of this have to do with today in the church year, with Trinity Sunday? Quite a lot, actually. Because today is one of those “transition Sundays” in the church year, as in the wider rhythms of modern American and United Methodist ecclesial life.

Today we make the transition from seasons of preparations for discipleship and mission (Lent and Easter) to an extended season of performance, living out our discipleship on God’s mission in Christ’s name and the Spirit’s power. Today, as we begin that journey and that work, we do so, as we do every year, with this core reminder about how we do it. We do it as participants in the life of the God whose mission sends us, a God we know as Trinity. One in Three and Three in One.

Our reading from Romans today points squarely to this. “All who are led by the Spirit are children of God...When we cry, Abba, Father, it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ.” This is our journey, a journey led by the Spirit, a journey in which we cry out to the Father, a cry comes from the Spirit interacting intimately with our own spirits, and a journey that we undertake as joint heirs, siblings, of Jesus Christ.

It’s a big, big transition we make today. We mark how big that transition is even in the fairly dramatic change of the color of the paraments after today from nine solid Sundays of white and gold to next week’s green, which will take us

into November. But because this transition is all about us operating within the very life of the Triune God, it is a transition we can welcome. We don't welcome all transitions in our lives and we shouldn't. Some of them are unjust, harmful, even life-threatening. But this transition we can welcome.

The Spirit leads us outwardly. This isn't something theoretical; it's something many in our midst today can give abundant witness to. We experience the Spirit leading us, showing us the way. We may not talk about it much. But we do experience it. All the time.

We don't always know where the Spirit is leading us, especially in times of transition. Many of you may remember my stories of being called to my first church at Hillsdale UMC. When the Metro District Superintendent called me about a possible appointment out of state, I was in a state of amazement and concern. I said I was willing to speak to the Wyoming District Superintendent, Rev. Deb Olinyek, and explore what she had in mind. Then when I discovered it was Hillsdale UMC I couldn't understand why God was calling me to serve there. I still didn't understand the first Sunday in July that year when I began in the worship service. But half way thru I had the strong sense that I was where God wanted me to be and the rest would be revealed. I didn't know how that would happen. What I did know is I could trust the Spirit was leading.

The Spirit is leading us! Jesus is walking with us, supporting us on the way. We experience both of these things kind of externally. But we also experience the Spirit moving us internally. Sometimes it's to call out in prayer to "our Father in heaven." You know, that prayer Jesus gave us to use. Or sometimes just the opening word, the "Our Father..." We've really been adopted into the Trinity. And when we cry out to the Father like that, well, we know it, we feel

it, don't we? God is our Father in heaven. God is our Mother, too, though Paul doesn't use that term here. God is our heavenly parent, and we are God's children.

We are God's adopted children, children of this Triune God who leads us, walks with us, encultures us. And being children, we grow, change, and mature; and we are all different. Just as Three in One does not mean Three who are identical with the One God, so our enculturation, life, and mission within the Triune God does not mean we are all the same, or become all the same. Conformity with the image of Jesus, God's only-begotten-son, another way Paul wrote about the nature and result of our life in the Triune God, does not mean uniformity with one another, either, except in one respect, which Paul identifies at the end of verse 17: "if, in fact, we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him."

Just as Jesus, God in flesh, brought suffering in the flesh into the heart of the Triune God, so, as we suffer with Christ, we are brought more and more into the same heart. Here is saving mystery, the suffering brought into the heart of the Triune God propelling us with the love of God toward all who suffer in this life, even if it brings more suffering to us. For when it does, we, in and with God, are also being glorified.

We are led by the Spirit, being moved inwardly by the Spirit regularly to call out to our adoptive Parent-of-Heaven, a parent whose mannerisms continue to shape us in our uniqueness, even as we are made joint heirs with Jesus, our brother, in our work, in engaging our mission, in using the gifts poured into us by the Spirit, in moving into the places and among the people and creatures who suffer, and so experiencing and knowing the glory of the Holy three, Holy One, pulsing and flowing ceaselessly in us, and us in the Holy One, Holy Three.

This is what we get to do. This is who we get to become. This is who our Triune God is making us to be, starting here, now.

As God's adopted children we experience the joy of His presence and love. Let me tell you Tannah's story as related by an observer:

"I saw it first on my social media feed. I later found that *USA Today* had written about it, too. It's a moment of pure joy committed to film. A young girl realizes she will be adopted. Her foster family will become her permanent one. Security footage from American Heritage School in South Jordan, Utah, captures the moment when 11-year-old Tannah Butterfield learned from Jackie Alexander, her school's office manager, that courts had approved her adoption. Alexander had received a call a few moments earlier from Tannah's mother about the news.

"Her mom knew she would want to know right away because she had been so worried," Alexander wrote. "I don't think even I could understand myself what that moment would feel like."

What is shown on the camera is heartwarming. Tannah flings herself into Alexander's arms, kicking her legs in excitement as she's carried across the room. Alexander said Tannah's parents had fought to adopt her "for as long as I can remember," and Tannah told CBS News she had dreamed of the moment for years.

"They are just caring, loving, they take really good care of me," she said. "My heart was so happy, it was like, 'Ahhh!' It was screaming."

There is such joy in an 11-year-old girl finding a permanent family. She belongs and that feeling overwhelmed her. I thought about that video and report again as I read this passage in Romans. Followers of Jesus do not have the spirit of fear. We have the spirit of adoption. Those who are led by the spirit of God are children of God. We've been adopted into his family. We are not just workers. We are children of the King! The phrase "Abba! Father!" speaks of

an intimate expression a child would say to his or her father. It's like saying "Daddy." Do you remember the joy you felt when you recognized God's love for you and that you were a part of his family?"

It is crucial to remember, every day of our lives, God's guarantee that we are able in the here and now to experience life's most important change. What's the most important change in our whole life? It's not getting rid of a particular habit. There may be some habits that we never finally kick. It's not smoothing all the rough spots in our personalities. We will undoubtedly reach the end of life still in a pitched battle against some form of selfishness. But there is one change that we can know has already taken place—that we have moved from being someone who is spiritually lost to someone who has been adopted into God's own family.

Paul rejoices, beginning in verse 14: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.

The Holy Spirit whispers to us, "Don't lose heart. You belong to God. You are God's child. You have been rescued by grace and you will never be rejected." Yet how can we believe that, especially when we continue to make the same mistakes and surrender to the same sick desires of our old natures? Here is the wonderful answer: God has already given us the status of righteousness. But we still don't have the reality of righteousness. God looks at Christians right now as God's perfect children, even though, in reality, we aren't even in the zip code of acting like perfect children. We can summarize our situation this way: "Even when we foul up, we don't foul out."

Imagine what it would be like if you were awarded the Olympic Gold medal in the 50-meter freestyle—which every four years showcases the world’s fastest aquatic athletes—even though you don’t know how to swim. All you would have to do to claim the status of “fastest swimmer on planet earth” is show up at the medal ceremony, cry a little bit during the National Anthem, and then head for the post-race party. That’s what God has done for us. If we enter a relationship with Jesus, then we are given the ultimate status in the universe—we are God’s own children—even though we have done nothing to earn that status.

In our hearts we know that this simply can’t be the whole picture. Who could possibly feel good about accepting a gold medal under such circumstances? That’s why the Holy Spirit instructs us, “Keep the gold medal. It’s really yours, and it will never be taken away. But now it’s time for your reality to catch up with your status. Get in the pool and let’s work on treading water.”

Our call, in other words, is to keep changing. God’s grace is an invitation to grow into a likeness of the One whose name we bear. As Paul puts it in verse 12, “So then, brothers and sisters, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”

What are the right steps? We must decide to feed our new desires to follow God, and starve the old desires that make us want to run away. The Holy Spirit is the key to winning that battle. God promises that the Spirit who lives inside us will remind us of the right things to do, will strengthen our desires to carry them out, and will never let us forget that as God’s children we are going to become what God has called us to be.

God’s children have two sets of desires in one body. Which one will we

feed? We must feed the new desires and starve the old ones. We must feed the ones that strengthen our walk with Christ and starve the ones that have always taken us down. The more we choose the new desires, the stronger the Holy Spirit grows our personal resolve to choose the new desires the next time as well. We won't always succeed. Trying to become a spiritual person in a fallen world—trying specifically to think, feel and live as Christ's person—will always to some degree be exasperating. But through God's gift of grace, Christ's victory over sin, and the indwelling presence of the Spirit, we can know that we truly have the power to change. With God's help, let it be so. Amen and amen.