

I

My wife Amy's grandmother Marjorie Tillman was a remarkable woman. She was kind, fiercely loyal to her family, and she made the world's best cherry pie from scratch. When she died a few years ago, I had the honor and privilege of presiding at her graveside and commending her to the arms of God.

I remember so clearly the day that Amy and I went to visit Grandma Tillman to share the news that we were pregnant and expecting twins. As some of you may know, Amy's mom and dad adopted Amy when she was just an infant, but when we told Grandma Tillman that we were expecting twins, she said, "Well that's not surprising to me. Twins run in my side of the family." I don't think it ever really dawned on her that her genetics had no bearing on Amy's, or if it did, she just didn't care. Amy was Marjorie's granddaughter, and they were family, full stop.

II

What is it that makes a family? Is it genetics? Is it a shared history? Is it a deep emotional bond? What are the rights and obligations of the members of a family? For those of us who claim to be Christians, what is the nature of our relationship to God, and to each other? These kinds of questions are at the heart of our reading this morning from Ephesians.

III

This morning, we're kicking off a six-week summer sermon series this morning entitled "No Longer Strangers" based on the book of Ephesians.

Ephesians isn't a book in the traditional sense of that word, but rather a letter written by a pastor to a group of Christians living in the late first century CE in and around the ancient city of Ephesus, which lies in modern-day Turkey near the northeastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea.

This morning, we're going to read through the first few paragraphs of the letter, and it's helpful to remember that letters in the ancient world were structured and formatted much like e-mail headers are structured and formatted in our modern world. The first line is the "from" line, the name of the sender. The second line is the "to" line, the name of the intended recipients. And then comes the "subject line," the main idea that the rest of the letter will support and expand upon.

But before we get to today's reading, a word of warning. The "subject" line of the Letter to the Ephesians is incredibly dense and deep, and in the Greek, it's actually one long run-on sentence. So perhaps it will help you absorb the text if you read along as I read it for us. If you'd like to follow along, you can find it on page XX of the pew bible. So now I invite you to listen for a Word from God from Ephesians 1:1-14.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God,*

*To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:*

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

*Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our*

*inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.*

This is the Word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

Like I said, the “subject line” of Ephesians is deep and dense. But here’s the part that caught my eye and ear this week, the part I kept coming back to.

“He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will.”

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.

He destined us for adoption as his children.

Adoption was a common practice in the ancient world. You may recall that the Roman Emperor Augustus Caesar was adopted by his great-uncle Julius Caesar. In the ancient world, just as in our modern world, adoption meant a permanent change in legal status – the creation of a new family. In the ancient world, just as in our modern world, adopted children carried the same legal rights, including the rights of inheritance, as if they were genetically related to their parents. Once the adoption was complete, the genetics no longer had any bearing on anything – it was only the relationship that mattered anymore.

#### IV

And that’s the gospel truth about you and God, my friend. You have been

adopted as God's own through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will. It's not your biology that matters. It's not where you came from or what's in your past that matters. All that matters is the permanent change in status that God has placed on you.

And because of that relationship status, because God had adopted you through Jesus Christ, will, that means you benefit both now and in the age to come from that status of being God's child – it means you have received and will receive redemption, forgiveness, and grace. It means you have received and will receive wisdom and insight. It means you have been marked with the seal of the Holy Spirit, now and forever.

God has chosen you, my friend. Not because of anything you've said or not said, not because of anything you've done or not done, but because of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Notice, my friend, how many times the phrase "in Christ" or "in him" appears just in this one paragraph. Notice how many crosses you see in this room, in your home, in our community. Every time you see a cross, it's like looking at your signed and sealed adoption papers. You have been adopted into God's family in and through Jesus Christ, and there is nothing on earth or above the earth or under the earth that can ever undo that.

God is crazy about you, my friend. There's nothing that God wouldn't do for you and nothing that God wouldn't give for you. God loves

you wholly and completely as you are. But God also loves you too much to let you stay just the way you are. Because with that change in status, with that new relationship, comes responsibility, too.

When I was a teenager, oftentimes when I'd leave the house, my mom would call after me and say, "Use your best judgment." As if teenage boys don't always using good judgment. And sometimes, she'd pull me aside and remind me that when I leave the house, I'm not just representing myself. I'm representing our family.

You have been adopted into God's family by the pleasure of God's good will, my friend. So remember who and whose you are. Remember that when you leave this place, when you go out there into the marketplace, into the school, into the office, into this community, you're not just representing yourself. You're representing this family, God's family. So hold onto what is good. Support the weak. Help the suffering. Strengthen the fainthearted. Return no one evil for evil. Honor all people.

Not because you're fearful of abandonment by God if you don't, but because you're so grateful for adoption by God that has already been accomplished in the cross of Jesus Christ.

V

Earlier this week I was rereading some of the history of this church that was published on the occasion of our

bicentennial. I was particularly drawn to the material on the decade of the 1960s, a time of tremendous upheaval and uncertainty in our world, our nation, and indeed, right here in our own community, and as I read, I couldn't help but notice how many of the issues that were facing our world then seem to rhyme with so many of the issues that are facing our world now.

This, too, is a time of upheaval and uncertainty in our world, in our nation, and indeed, right here in our own community.

Someone once observes that during seasons of upheaval such as this one, people are not asking, 'Is the gospel true?' They're asking, 'Does the gospel appear to make a bit of difference in the lives of the people who claim it?'

So let us remember who and whose we are - siblings who have been destined for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ. Let us remember that we have received forgiveness, that we have been lavished with grace upon grace. Let us remember who and whose we are, and let us act like it, this day and always.

Thanks be to God. Amen.