

SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSONS
Commentary by Michael Sigler
February 19, 2012

Heirs to the Promise

Read Galatians 3:15-18 & 4:1-7

Key verse: “So you are no longer a slave, but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God” (Galatians 4:7).

The story is told from Abraham Lincoln’s life that a young soldier was fighting for the Union army in the Civil War. His older brother and his father had both been killed in the war. The young soldier went to Washington, D.C. to ask the president for an exemption from military service so that he could return home and help his widowed mother on the family farm.

When the young soldier arrived in Washington, he went to the White House and asked to see the president. The guards immediately sent the young soldier away saying, “The president is too busy to see you.” Discouraged, he sat down on a park bench near the White House. He hadn’t been there long before a little boy approached him and asked, “What’s wrong?”

The soldier explained his predicament and, when he finished, the little boy took his hand and said, “Come with me.”

The boy led the soldier past the guards and through a back door of the White House. Suddenly they were in the president’s office! President Lincoln looked up and said, “What can I do for you, Todd?” Only then did the soldier realize that his new young friend was the president’s son.

Todd said to the president, “Daddy, this soldier needs to talk to you.”

The young soldier then pled his case to President Lincoln, and was excused from the war effort due to his family circumstances.

It is important *who you know* and *whose you are!* These two passages in Galatians 3 and 4 deal with important issues of identity, belonging, family and the privileges that come as a result of our relationship with God through Christ.

Paul here argues that, through faith in Christ, the Galatian believers and *all* believers—both Jew and Gentile—enjoy access to God and belonging to the family of God. This subject is so important that Paul approaches it in more than one way.

First, he uses the example of “a person’s [legal] will” (3:15 and following). The fulfillment of God’s promise to Abraham, argues Paul, was contingent on a human response of *faith*. This promise (likened here to a legal will or “covenant”) was given to Abraham and his “Seed.” That seed was not limited to the Jewish race, but Christ

was the true seed of Abraham. So, all who are in Christ by faith, including the Gentiles, are now heirs to the blessings promised to Abraham (3:16).

Further, Paul explains that the Mosaic law, given some 400 years after God made a covenant with Abraham, did not change the way that the promise is to be received—not by keeping the law but by *believing* God’s promise. In case the Galatian believers did not yet understand their identity and their spiritual heritage, Paul tells them that, through faith in Christ, they are now heirs to the blessings promised to Abraham!

In Galatians 4:1-7, Paul comes at this issue of spiritual identity in another way. He argues that, as long as a child is under age, he cannot have full access to his inheritance (4:1-2). It is held in a trust for him or her until the heir comes of age. So, in a way, the child heir is more like a servant than like a full son or daughter.

Spiritually, we are heirs to a great inheritance. But until we respond in *faith* to God’s promise, we will remain as servants rather than sons (4:3).

Finally, Paul argues, God sent his Son Jesus so that “we might receive adoption as children” (4:4-5). We need adoption because, like the prodigal son in Jesus’ parable, we have wandered away from our Heavenly Father. Through faith in Christ, we are “adopted” back into right relationship with God. When we become part of God’s family, as part of our spiritual inheritance, we enjoy such intimacy with our Heavenly Father that we can know him as our “Abba” (4:6). Abba is the warm, affectionate word for one’s father, not unlike how we in the South call our father “Daddy.”

So, Paul wanted the Galatian Christians to know *who they are and whose they are in Christ*: heirs of all the blessings promised to Abraham, adopted back into the family of God, and given full access to their “Daddy,” who loved them [and loves us] more extravagantly than any earthly father ever could!

John W. Fountain, a professor of journalism, shared this personal testimony in the NPR series, “This I Believe”:

I believe in God. Not that cosmic, intangible spirit-in-the-sky that Mama told me as a little boy “always was and always will be.” But the God who embraced me when Daddy disappeared from our lives—from my life at age four—the night police led him down the stairs, away from our front door, in handcuffs. The God who warmed me when we could see our breath inside our freezing apartment, when the gas was disconnected in the dead of another wind-whipped Chicago winter, and there was no food, little hope, and no hot water.

The God who held my hand when I witnessed boys in my ‘hood swallowed by the elements, by death, and by hopelessness; who claimed me when I felt like “no-man’s son,” amid the absence of any man to wrap his arms around me and tell me, “everything’s going to be OK,” to speak proudly of me, to call me son.

I believe in God, the God who I have come to know as father, as Abba—Daddy.

It wasn't until many years later, standing over my father's grave for a conversation long overdue, that my tears flowed. I told him about the man I had become. I told him about how much I wished he had been in my life. And I realized fully that in his absence, I had found another. Or that he—God the Father, God my Father—had found me.

(Contact Michael at msigler@fumcfwb.com.)