

Sermon Title: Family Reunion

Scripture: Romans 8:12-17

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As some of you may know, I am an incredibly big fan of music. Especially when it comes to live music. Music is an incredibly powerful means of communication. The way in which music allows us to express ourselves, to say things that are in our hearts that we aren't always capable of saying for ourselves. The way in which music can make us feel all kinds of different emotions without a word even being uttered. It is such a powerful means that people are willing to travel hours on end just to hear a song that has affected them deeply in person. It is truly an amazing thing. So just for a second, I want everyone to take a moment and think about a musical artist you saw live? Think back to that moment, immerse yourself in the feeling of being in that crowd of people as you heard the artist play and sing. Consider what was possibly going through your mind as you heard the artist play your favorite song, as the people around you possibly sang along. Think about the feelings you experienced in that moment. Take a moment to do so.

For me, there are very few feelings like the feeling of being in a crowd of hundreds singing along to a song together at the top of our lungs. It is a feeling that is almost addictive in a way. That feeling that I'm describing, that so many people experience at concerts, is a feeling of community. All these people coming together for one specific reason and being able to live in the moment, not worrying

about what was happening outside of that specific moment. Having been to a few concerts, I have witnessed people from all walks of life come together and find unity in music. It is truly a beautiful thing. However, while the community formed at a concert is beautiful, once that concert is over, so too is the community. Don't get me wrong, with the continual advancements of technology, the community built at concerts can sometimes foster smaller communities among concertgoers by way of facebook groups or group chats, but the type of community that is there in that specific moment of the concert, will never live on past that night.

I recently attended a concert with my sister in Asheville. The artist, Noah Kahan, has quickly blown up and become a huge hit over the past few years to the point where he is now selling out arenas. One of the biggest reasons he has gotten so popular is because his music speaks to people and is unabashedly emotional and authentic. So at one point during his concert in Asheville, he stopped to let the stage crew reset and read some fan signs in the crowd. As he read out a few of the signs, it became apparent to me pretty quickly that there was a common theme among the fans there that night. So many people had come to this show to be a part of a community that understood them, a community where they felt they belonged, where they felt authentically at home. A community that heard and acknowledged their pain and wept with them but also heard and acknowledged their joys and celebrated with them. As I drove home that night, I couldn't help but to ponder on

why people do not always feel this same draw, this same community, in the church?

In today's passage, Paul is writing to the Romans emphasizing to them that through the Trinity, we are a family, that we have identity, belonging, and purpose. Through the sacrifice of the Son, through the guidance of the spirit, and through the grace of the Father, we are brought into communion with God as "heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ." What this means is that, as Rev. Dr. Clayton J. Scmit states, "the three-in-one establishes a home for us." It is through the Trinity that we are given everything. It is through the Trinity, that we not just find community but we find family. You see the inherent nature of the Trinity is familial. It is through this familial nature that we are adopted into the Family of God. As a family, we belong to one another. As a family, we are called to care for one another. This family is not something that we the church must seek to be but that we the church have been divinely appointed to be. As Chap Clark states in his book, *Adoptive Church*, "When God brought us into his family, he didn't give us the option of disconnecting ourselves from one another. We can't really call ourselves members of the church of Jesus Christ if that's our attitude. In Christ, you and I are adopted siblings in God's household, we belong to each other..."

Throughout this past week, I have spent a lot of time reflecting on family. More so than usual given my job as Director of Family Ministries. And throughout

this week, I kept thinking of family reunions. Growing up, I was always fascinated by family reunions. While my family would get together for Thanksgiving and Christmas, a full on family get together outside of those holidays was always difficult to manage. However, all of my friends in school would have these huge family reunions with hundreds of people. They would have t-shirts made and everything. I could never wrap my head around having that many people in your family. As I got older, I realized that those family reunions were not always about blood relation but about something much deeper. Oftentimes, those family reunions were an opportunity for relatives, blood and otherwise, to be together and rejoice that they belonged to one another. The more I thought about this the more I came to realize that the spirit of adoption that we are called to have as siblings in Christ is best exemplified by family reunions. With family reunions, people from all walks of life come together to spend authentic time with one another, rejoicing, lamenting, and overall caring for one another. This is what Paul is telling us when he says that we have been given a spirit of adoption. That we have been adopted into God's family not by our own actions but by the grace of God and the love of Jesus Christ. Paul is emphasizing to us that it is our responsibility as a response to this adoption that we must seek to embrace our siblings in Christ and rejoice in the Good News of the Gospel.

As I spent more time thinking about the question that arose for me on that drive home from the concert, I came upon this quote by Dietrich Bonhoeffer that provided me with some insight. Bonhoeffer states, “ Those who love their dreams of a Christian community more than the Christian community itself become destroyers of that Christian community even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest, earnest, and sacrificial.” What Bonhoeffer is saying here reaffirms the message Paul provides the Romans in our scripture text. If we are to genuinely be a part of Christian community, a Christian family, we must put behind us our personal intentions, desires, and comforts and instead embrace a spirit of adoption. As Paul states, we did not receive a spirit of slavery to be fearful but instead a spirit of adoption to be steadfast in our responsibilities as a family, to love another and to care for one another.

But this mentality of a spirit of adoption is not one that we, as the Church of Jesus Christ, are always good at. As many of you probably know, the portion of the American population that identifies with no religion has been rapidly rising over the past three decades. While there is some data that suggest that this increase may be slowing, it is increasing nonetheless. Unfortunately, many of these people who identify as “nones” are former Christians. There is a large number of people within this segment of the population that left the Church for a variety of reasons. However, one of the common themes that researchers see in this population is that

many of them left because they felt ostracized by the church. They felt as if they were not welcome because they did not fit a specific community's definition of a Christian. Think about that, people have been driven away from the church because they were told, whether through words or actions, that they did not have a place in the family of God. People were driven away from the church because those within the christian community loved their dream of community more than the community itself. This mentality is what Paul is advising us against in today's text. We are not called to be fearful but instead to open ourselves up to being an active part of the family of God. We are called to change the way in which we live, to not be tied to preconceived notions of others but instead to recognize the presence of God in each individual we meet. This is how we begin to heal the hurt that has been caused to our siblings in Christ. As theologian Eberhard Busch states, "When we see these others as God's children too, we communicate with them differently. They are for us no longer simply problematic contemporaries, but also children of God."

While this is an imperative first step, we must also recognize that recognizing the image of God in others is not the same as embracing them as family. We must also take the necessary steps to accept them into our family, to open our arms wide and welcome them home just as the father did for his prodigal son in Jesus' parables. We must acknowledge that if we are to live into our role as

the family of God we must embrace the notion that we are called to adopt each other as we are, and not demand that children of God assimilate to what is most comfortable for us. The church is called to be a place for all children of God to come together and be with their siblings as they are. It is called to be a place where people from all walks of life can be a family. A family that understands one another, even if they don't always agree. A family that belongs to another, A family that is home for one another. A family that hears and acknowledges each other's pain and weeps but also hears and acknowledges each other's joys and celebrates. In doing so we live into the spirit of adoption given to us.

Beloved siblings in Christ, we must rejoice that the triune God has adopted us all into the Family of God. We must rejoice that we are no longer slaves to fear but children of God. We must embrace and enthusiastically approach the possibility that every day is an opportunity for a family reunion. May it be so.  
Amen.