

Children of Promise

sermon digest

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Galatians 3:27-4:7

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For more than fifty years, *Are You My Mother?* by P. D. Eastman has been winning awards for its popularity with small children. After multiple readings in our house with each of our children and grandchildren, we could eventually read the story without looking at the pages.

In case you have not been reading children's books lately, here is the story: As mother bird searches for food, her chick hatches from the egg and sets out on foot to find its mother. The search leads to a kitten, a hen, a dog, and a cow. For a child the ridiculous becomes obvious as each animal in turn denies being the chick's mother. Then the little bird looks to machines—an old car, a boat, and an airplane. Finally he hops through the teeth and into the mouth of a large power shovel. The machine snorts and grinds into action, and the bird demands to see his mother. Then the shovel rises above the tree and drops the chick back into the nest just as his mother is returning home. The two are united, much to their delight, and the baby bird tells all about the adventure of his search.

On a slightly more sophisticated level, Paul's letter to Galatians leads Gentile Christians on a search for authentic parenthood. According to Jewish law, when someone has a Jewish mother and gentile father, Jewish identity was to be verified through the mother. Eastman's book for children raised the appropriate question, *Are You My Mother?* for the important question of religious identity. Paul eventually gets to the maternity question as he launches into the choice of one's maternal origin either with Abraham's wife Sarah, the free woman, or Abraham's concubine Hagar, the slave woman.

Does genealogy matter? The big issue raging in the church for Galatians was the policy of accepting Gentiles into the church, which had supposedly been settled at the Jerusalem conference in Acts 11. Although Acts gives Peter credit for opening the church to Gentiles, Paul accuses Peter of hypocrisy (2:11-14). There are other indications in the New Testament that genealogy was a significant hurdle for Gentile Christians. Luke (3:8) has John the Baptist challenge the importance of genealogy, "Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham." In John 8, the same issue rises to the surface as people protest to Jesus that as descendants of Abraham they don't need his salvation; as children of Abraham they had never been slaves.

We are back into the nature-nurture debates about human behavior. For a while behaviorist psychology seemed to hold sway. The idea that we are born with a *tabula rasa*, Latin for "blank slate," that is totally dependent on experience and influences in our environment to determine behavior was the standing philosophy for past generations. But behavior issues like sexuality and addiction have been found to have a genetic root. Today we are more likely to ask questions about the degree to which we can manage our nature to depart from our biological determinism.

With the movement of the gospel into the Roman world, the Gentile question continued to burn and seemed to boil down to the identity of the true children of Abraham, the children of promise. Some teachers demanded that Gentiles must convert to Judaism and observe basic Jewish rites, like circumcision, in order to become Christians. Paul argued that the true children of Abraham get their identity through Christ rather than from biological heritage. The only significant rite is baptism through which, Paul claimed, the Galatians "clothed yourselves with Christ." Paul insisted that people who belong to Christ are "Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise" and that questions like nationality, social status, and gender are irrelevant. We are children of Abraham, children of promise, through Christ.

Paul the classic, male, misogynist, patriarchal Jew does not have a reputation for generosity toward women or toward marriage, so one has to wonder if Paul really intended to say what is written in Galatians about genealogical distinctions. In spite of the strong message affirming our freedom in Christ and the insistence that gender is not important, Beverly Gaventa concludes that Galatians appears to be "nothing more than a guy thing." (Interpretation, July, 2000, p 267ff). The only woman named in Galatians is Hagar, Abraham's concubine. He contrasts Hagar with Abraham's wife without mentioning her name Sarah, and both women are important not for their personhood but for their symbolic representation of slavery and freedom. Paul also affirms that Jesus was "born of a woman," but he does not see fit to give the mother of Jesus a name.

Yet, Galatians 3:28 has become the biblical center for Christian inclusion of all people regardless of genealogical distinction. Paul was given to oral communication. Perhaps this was a slip of the tongue, or a theological slip that allows for all of us to claim our place and importance in this world as children of God above the distinctions we might find in the marketplace of social conflict. Paul zipped through the horns of

our dilemma at three levels—nationality, social status, and gender: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” But we have to insist that inclusion is not limited to these categories. Today, we are far more likely to focus on skin pigment, ethnicity, or religion.

When we were forming our church covenant, we discussed the categories of inclusion and decided that we had not exhausted the subject and were likely to come upon other areas where our boundary lines are unimportant to God. So we wrote: “We are an inclusive fellowship, welcoming all persons without regard to the outward distinctions by which the world separates, classifies, and discriminates.”

Ordaining women became a burning issue in US churches in the 1970's. Harvard Divinity School theologian Krister Stendahl wrote a pamphlet on the subject for Lutheran churches. He observed the denigration of women especially in some of Paul's writings and called for Lutherans to look for the high places in the Scriptures. Paul's statement in Galatians 3:28 sets a trajectory toward the future that has now come into focus. There is good reason to believe that the egalitarian stand may well have been a slip of the pen and that Paul was primarily arguing for the acceptance of Gentiles in the church and had no intention of advocating women's leadership roles or emancipation of slaves. But this is one of those places where it seems that an intelligence far higher than Paul's was at work. Even if he slipped up with the inclusion of women along with men as children of promise, he made one of the most profound statements of God's inclusive love that can be found anywhere in the Bible. As I have heard repeatedly in our work with the International Council of Community Churches, “we are to be as inclusive as the love of God.”

We are created to be the children of God. Stendahl detected Paul's dependence on Jewish Torah in his slip of the pen. In the first creation story, Genesis 1 posits the creation of humanity as a single act including both male and female in the image of God. Stendahl detected the reference to Genesis in the switch from “or” to “and” in Paul's three couplets. Note, Paul did not write no longer male *or* female; he followed the phrase as it appears in the creation story, “male ***and*** female.”

I always have a struggle to communicate with our science-oriented friends that our creation faith should not be equated with scientific creationism. We have no argument with modern science over the role of evolution in the development of the planet and all of its life forms. Creation is the affirmation of God at the root of our beginnings, and repeatedly the Bible finds the common ground for affirming our family bonds to one another in our divine parent, to whom Jesus taught us to pray, “Our Father.” The creation is far more about the ties of the human family than about the science of life.

I recall an early experience in ministry in Louisville. I participated in a monthly gathering of African American and Caucasian pastors in which we sincerely attempted to build bridges to one another. Some of us had to learn to swallow our pride, when our black brothers chose to speak bluntly about the pure teachings of our gospel. Sometimes you have to hear the gospel in another person's shoes to hear all of the reverberations in human behavior. We had accepted racial integration of schools, restaurants, hotels, and public bathrooms and water fountains; but on both sides, there was strong resistance to interracial marriage.

In fact, Kentucky had a Day Law, written by Democrat Carl Day in 1904 and later sustained by the Supreme Court, that prohibited interracial education on either a private or public school level. The law was finally amended in 1950 and eventually removed. As a young pastor I was told that the Kentucky law requiring a bond for ministers, still on the books, to perform weddings was written to prevent interracial weddings.

One of our African American brothers with a reputation for being intentionally offensive made a statement at lunch that caused our jaws to drop. He began with the declaration that he really had no interest in “our” women, but if we are going to be “brothers” in Christ there is no reason why we cannot be brothers-in-law. His statement was met with shock and resistance from both races. As I recall that conversation some thirty years ago I think of how much it was like Paul's slip of the pen including women. Not all of us, but some of us have found that common family connection in the God of creation. I doubt that anyone in the room then would have the same reaction today. Interracial marriage is becoming a norm.

Old misogynist Paul may not have intended to set loose the trajectory toward the time when slavery would end and female equality would begin, but he was right to project the implications of God's inclusive love transcending all of our prejudices.

Now may the God of eternal, unconditional love mirrored in the mind of Christ and flowing through the dynamic, refreshing wind of the Spirit fill our thoughts and move our feet to be God's inclusive people.