

On Being a Child of God

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Second Samuel 7: 12-15 and Romans 5:6-11

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One time in my ministry, I was teaching a confirmation class that went on for about six months. Now, during that time, our class took a weekend trip where all of us stayed in this nice retreat center somewhere in upstate New York. I would describe the retreat center for you, but I think if you've seen one you've seen them all. There were lots of cabins, a lake, walking paths through woods of towering pines. You know how these places look. And if you've been on such a retreat, you probably also know that there were several different churches at this retreat but in our group it was me, about a dozen youth and a woman I will call Louise who was an adult chaperone from our group.

Well, this was a while back and I don't remember much about the retreat, except for a lot of excited middle school aged kids who were overjoyed about being away from their parents for the weekend. But I do remember that at one point during the weekend, all the kids gathered together in this auditorium for worship, and during that service of worship all the kids had to repeat the phrase "I am a child of God".

Well, the whole service of worship to me seemed rather uncontroversial. No one in the service was asked to sacrifice to a golden calf or bow to Mecca or practice witchcraft, or anything of that nature. To me it all seemed like a rather ordinary service like you might find in any church in the Reformed tradition on any given Sunday. In fact, the whole thing seemed rather boring. But, not so to Louise. After the service she complained to the worship leader that she did not agree with these confirmands being told that they are children of God. "Oh yes, they may be creations of God," she said, "they may even be made in the image of God, but they

should not be called children of God until they have committed their lives to Jesus Christ once they complete their confirmation.”

Now, you may be wondering where in the world Louise got something like that. I didn’t ask her, but I think I know. In John Chapter 8, Jesus is talking with the Pharisees when he tells them that they are not children of God because if they were they would love him, but as it is, they hate him and they are ready to kill him. So instead, he tells them, they are therefore children of the devil.

Well, in spite of such passages, you may tell me that Louise sounds to you like someone who was just ridiculous, maybe even mean spirited. Who in their right mind would have a problem with someone going through confirmation saying “I am a child of God”. Well, to be honest with you, I understood then, and I now understand her concern. I knew Louise well enough to know that she was not against these confirmands who were eleven and twelve and thirteen. In fact, she loved them. She loved them and she cared about their salvation and their faith. And what she did not want is for these very young impressionable confirmands to suddenly believe that God would tolerate everything they did and that they could do and believe whatever they wanted with no consequence whatsoever. Louise loved these children and she did not want them to be indoctrinated into some form of cheap grace, we might say.

Louise loved these children, but I can’t help but wonder what kind of parents Louise had. Now, I knew Louise to be a good adult who obeyed the law and told the truth and said please and thank you and all that stuff, but if she was anything like most of us, then she was not always like that. Surely, when she was a little girl she must have had moments where she lied and talked back to her parents and skipped school and tried out all kinds of behaviors that most

of us remember trying out at some time or another on that long sometimes bumpy road to growing up. And what do you think happened in those times with Louise's mom and dad? Do you think that no matter how many times she lied or skipped school or talked back, her parents said "That's ok. That's ok, Louise, we want you to do right but it's all going to be hugs and lollipops for you no matter what? Hugs and lollipops if you do what we want, and hugs and lollipops even if you don't." Because if that's so, then I want her to know that that wasn't the kind of parenting that I had when I grew up and that isn't the kind of parent I think the scriptures paint a picture of when it comes to God.

In our Old Testament lesson today, we hear the Lord makes a promise to King David and he says "When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. But my love will never be taken away from him as I took it from Saul."

This is a passage from Second Samuel that we Christians like to read a lot because we take it to be a passage of prophecy about Jesus. You may recall that in the gospels Jesus is called the Son of David, because in this passage God promises that the Messiah of his people will be able to trace his bloodline back to David. And I know that telling you that raises all kinds of questions as we may wonder what this passage means when it talks about the Messiah doing wrong if as Christians we believe that Jesus was sinless, and we may wonder what this so called house is that Jesus built, and how Jesus came from David's own body, and maybe there are even other

questions. Those are all important questions, but they are questions for another sermon at another time.

What I want to focus on for this sermon is something you may not think about when you focus on just who this passage is about and that is how there is no conflict in this passage between God's love of his son and God's punishment and discipline of his son. There is no sense in this passage that a loving parent allows his child to do whatever he wants whenever he wants. In fact, what this passage says to me is that part of loving your child is not only showering your child with affection but using discipline and punishment because you care about how your child grows up. And that's why your mother always said this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you. My mother got that mixed up, though, she would always say this is going to hurt you more than it hurts me. I take it what she meant to say is this is going to hurt me more than it hurts you.

Well, if Louise were here among us today, I guess she would pull a bible out of her purse and point to her favorite passages of scripture like John Chapter 8, and as this very satisfied smile crossed her face she might say "Aha, aha, pastor Rich what do you think about that? What do you think about this passage which tells us that everyone is not a child of God?" Well, frankly, I don't know what to think. I have given up on trying to make every single passage of scripture fit every one of my beliefs, and the older I get the more I find that if you want to make every single passage of scripture fit your beliefs you will be left believing nothing at all. But if Louise were to demand that I give her some kind of answer about such passages, I guess I would say two things. First, I would say that I would rather a thousand people be convinced that they are children of God when they are not than one person be convinced that he is *not* a

child of God when he is. And the second thing I would say is that maybe when it is all said and done it is possible to so utterly turn your back on God that you disown God as a father and a parent, but even so, God is never the one who disowns you. Despite what I have heard people say over and over and over again, it is quite clear in the New Testament, as we hear in our passage from Romans that Jesus died on the cross not so that God could accept us, not to reconcile God to us, God did not need to be reconciled to us, but for us to be reconciled to God, *for us to be reconciled to God.*

Today as we baptize Zetta Grace York, we do so in this church proclaiming that she is a child of God. And by that we do not mean that she has yet made a confession of faith or she has any understanding of faith, nor do we mean that we can gaze into some crystal ball and see that one day she will make such a confession or that we have any certain knowledge of how her life will turn out. Her parents, Jim and Courtney and all of you have vowed to God to teach her all about who God is and who Jesus is, but we don't know how her life and her faith will turn out, and as of right now, she knows nothing about who God is. But in spite of that, in my mind at least, she is a child of God. She is not just someone who is created in God's image as important as that fact may be. But she is a child of God because God claims her through the waters of baptism.

And so are you, and so am I. That doesn't mean that God is pleased with everything you do. In fact, when my life comes to an end and I see the list of all the things I did to please God and all the things I did to displease God, I am hoping that the please God side of the ledger is at least half as long as the displease side of the ledger. But what being a child of God does mean is that back in 1973, God's promise to love me and protect me and provide for me was claimed

for me over the waters of baptism, before I too knew who God was, just as God's love was poured out for me on the cross back in about 33 AD, long before I ever existed.

It is not about cheap grace, it is not about permissive parenting, it is not about being able to do whatever you want or believe whatever you want. It is about believing that we love because he first loved us, it is about believing that while we might reject God, God never rejects us, so repeat after me "I am a child of God". In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.