

Not a Short, Simple Answer
A Sermon on Romans 8:12-25 by the Rev. Philip Major
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Do you love the United States of America? For some of us this is not an easy question to answer. If someone asks me, "Do you love the United States of America?" my answer is not short and simple.

Do I love the United States of America? Yes, absolutely. I love that the Constitution of the United States begins with these words: "We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, ensure the blessings of liberty for ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America." I love the fact that we do not have a king or a queen ruling over us with no regard for the rule of law.

I love the fact that we live in a democracy. I love the fact that the people get to choose their leaders. I love the way people in the United States work together to solve problems. When there is a flood or a big fire, people in the United States don't wait for someone else to come and help. People volunteer to help others.

Do I love the United States of America? Absolutely yes. I love the diverse natural environments of America. I love being able to visit the ocean and walking on the beach. I love walking through the forests of America. You and I live in an especially beautiful part of God's creation, here in Syracuse. Farmers grow some of the most delicious fruits and vegetables in the world.

I love the diversity of our people. I love the fact that I can walk a few blocks down Salina Street to the Salt City Market and eat food prepared by people who were born in Iraq, or Thailand, or Jamaica. I love going to the Farmer's Market on a Saturday morning and hearing people speaking many different languages. I love the fact that when I walk through one of our beautiful parks I see diverse people, and that many people are willing to say hello, even to people who are different from them.

Do I love the United States of America? Absolutely yes, but also, sometimes, not very much at all. There are some things I do not love about the United States of America. I don't love the fact that our people own more guns than any other country on Earth, and it's not even close. If you get 100 Americans into a room together and they bring their guns with them, on average, there will be 120 guns in the room. It sounds dangerous, and it is. Each year about 45,000 Americans die as a result of guns.

I don't love the fact that, even though the United States is extremely powerful and has the largest economy in the world, more than 10 million of our children live in poverty and more than 25 million Americans don't have health insurance.

I don't love the fact that America is in many ways a dangerous place for immigrants and people with darker complexion. In 2026 federal agents have been moving through our towns and cities arresting, attacking and sometimes even killing people. I don't love the fact that in Biddeford, Maine there is a five year old girl who doesn't have a father anymore, because federal agents shot and killed him. I don't love the fact that agents of the federal government have arrested and detained almost one million people, and that thousands of them had green cards or other legal status. Most of the people who have been detained were following the rules. They were still treated like dangerous criminals.

Do I love the United States of America? My answer is not short and simple. It's long and complicated.

Our patron saint, St. Paul, faced similar, difficult questions. By the time Paul was an old man, he was responding to the difficult questions with long, complicated answers. Paul was an old man when he wrote the letter to the Romans. By this time, he realized he had made a few mistakes in his earlier teaching, and he was answering complicated questions. So Paul's answers in the letter to the Romans are longer, more detailed, and more complex.

One of the big questions in Romans is "What is the power of Christ?" Another big, complicated question is, "What is the relationship between the Gentile Christians and the Jews?" These are not easy, simple questions to answer. That doesn't mean it's not worth trying to understand what Paul is saying.

On the contrary, Paul's letter to the Romans gives us the most important answers; it gives us strength and wisdom as we face the difficult challenges of our lives. I always wish we had more time to study Paul's letter to the Romans, so it will be the subject for our special Sunday Bible Study series later on this year. For today let's give our attention to three ideas from today's passage.

Let's notice that Paul spends a lot of time talking about the Holy Spirit. In chapter eight of Romans Paul refers to the Holy Spirit twenty times. This is unusual compared with all of the other books in the Bible. Paul is especially concerned with the work of the Spirit in the beginning of our passage. *If by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.*

What does this mean? What does it mean to be led by the Spirit of God? The easiest way to understand what Paul is talking about with this language about being led by the Spirit is to consider the opposite. The opposite of being led by the Spirit of God is to be led by our sins.

Sometimes we let ourselves be led by our sins, by our mistakes. We let our sins be the guiding principles in our lives. Sometimes we are guided by our anger, or by our grief and sadness, or by our fears. Sometimes we are guided by our pride. We can tell we are being guided by our pride when we stop listening to others and do all of the talking in the conversation, as if life is all about me! Sometimes we are guided by our greed, or by our need to dominate others. We can easily see the results of letting ourselves be led by our sins, because there are many examples of people being led by their sinfulness in the world around us.

Being led by the Spirit of God is the opposite. When we are led by the Spirit we don't practice being angry; we practice forgiveness. When we are being led by the Spirit we are not full of pride; we are full of generosity. So the first idea in chapter eight is that being a follower of Christ means setting aside our old way, which was to be guided by our own sins, and to take up a new way of living, which means to be led by the Spirit of God.

Paul uses an unexpected word in today's passage: adoption. Adoption is a life changing experience. For Paul, adoption is very positive theme; he wants his listeners to let their lives be changed by their journey with God. Paul writes, *For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God.* Being a follower of Christ is like being adopted into a new family.

No matter how much you love your parents, you should consider being adopted into this new family. It's about setting part of our old life behind. In God's family we are not expected to get perfect scores on our report cards. We leave that behind. Instead we are expected to forgive people when they make mistakes. In God's family the only rule is that we love one another. Taking on a spirit of adoption means trusting that God's love and God's grace is enough.

The last idea is the most difficult to see when we read this passage in English. The original language of Romans is Greek. Do you know Greek? I don't know Greek. But even if we don't know Greek we find a clue to Paul's third idea by listening to four Greek words used in verses 16 and 17. The verbs are *symmartyrei*, *sygkleronomoi*, *sympaschomen*, *syndoxasthomen*.

What do you notice about these four verbs? Each one begins with the same two letters, 's' and 'y' and the same sound: 'sy'. This is the clue we need. Each of these verbs begins with a prefix that means 'with' or 'co'.

When we translate the verbs literally these verses have a different emphasis: *When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is that very Spirit that cowitnesses with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs of God and coheirs with Christ-- if, in fact, we cosuffer with Christ so that we may also be coglorified with him.* Paul continues in a similar vein in the rest of the chapter eight, but I think you get the point.

We are not asked to follow a savior who is far removed from our lives. We are invited to set aside our old way of doing things so we can dedicate lives to being cowitnesses with the Spirit, cowitnesses to the love of God. We are invited to set aside our preoccupations with the family inheritance in order to be coheirs with Christ in God's legacy of generosity. We have the opportunity to cosuffer with Christ, which means to let some of our suffering be a vehicle of God's grace.

The question Paul is answering is, "What does it look like for us to be faithful?" It's not a short, simple answer, but empowerment is the central thread. God empowers us to choose to set aside our allegiance to our sinfulness and let ourselves be led by the Spirit of truth, love, and forgiveness. God empowers us to let ourselves be adopted into God's family. God empowers to be cowitnesses with Christ to the power of God's love to resurrect us from despair and sin.

All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption. Brothers and sisters, you are God's beloved children.