

"CHILDREN OF GOD"

June 4, 1989

TEXT: Romans 8:14 "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God."

The Bible tells us that Jesus often taught by means of parables, and this morning I would like to begin with a parable of my own.

Once upon a time there were three fishermen. Each went out to sea in a small boat without any radio or other navigational equipment, for none of them expected to go very far. But, while they were engrossed in fishing, the wind and current drove them out to sea, well beyond the sight of land. And, since the sun was hidden by a heavy overcast, none of them had any idea of where he was or how to get back home.

Soon, however, the first man was spotted by the crew of a small freighter. Seeing that he was in trouble, they hailed him and offered to tow him back to port. But he was a very independent sort and politely declined. True, he had no idea where land was, and the currents were tricky, the weather often uncertain. But the day was pleasant, the fishing was good, and he was in no rush to get home. So he waved the freighter on and continued fishing.

A little later, the second man was also spotted. Again the crew offered to tow him in, and this time the offer was accepted. The fisherman tied a line from the freighter to his boat, and let it tow him back toward shore. But, after a while, he began to get bored, and, spotting a huge fish, he decided to go after it. He untied the line and the freighter went on without him.

Finally, the ship came across the third man. Once more they offered help, and he, too, accepted. But this man kept his boat tied safely to the freighter till it led him back to port. Now, which of these do you think showed good judgement? Fisherman number one? Fisherman number two? Or fisherman number three? And, if you were going to go fishing, which one would you want to be with?

I think most of us would probably agree on that. Of course, we can not say what happened to the first two. Perhaps, when the tide came in, they simply drifted back to shore. Or maybe some other ship came along later and towed them safely into port.

Or perhaps the sun came out and, using its position in the sky, they found their own way home. We have no way of knowing. Being people of good will, I am sure we all hope they made it safely. But we can not be sure. What we do know, however, is that their best chance for survival was to have taken the tow when it was offered.

And it is much the same with the help God offers. We, too, are often adrift on the sea of life. Currents and weather are at best uncertain and sometimes downright dangerous. Then, along comes God, in Jesus of Nazareth, offering us a tow. As St. Paul put it, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself."

Of course, what we do with that offer depends on us. We can accept the help that is offered. Or we can go our own way like fishermen number one and two. I, for one, would not want to say that those who do so are doomed. I certainly hope they make it, but I can not be certain. What is certain is God's promise to those who grab His towline and hold on for all their worth.

We have an expression of that promise here in this morning's scripture: "For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are the sons of God . . . And, if children, then heirs, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ." Now that all sounds very nice and oh so religious, but what in the world does it mean? Heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ? What does Paul mean by that? Well, as the full passage indicates, Paul is talking about adoption, specifically our adoption as "sons" of God. And, in the Roman world, adoption was a very serious and important thing.

In those days, when a man was adopted, he legally "died" to his old life and became a totally new and different person. So much so, that any former debts or legal charges were automatically cancelled. And he became heir to a full share in his new father's estate. But there was one catch. He also came completely under the new father's authority. Authority which, in those days, continued not just through childhood, but as long as the father lived.

With that bit of background, I think you can understand why Paul saw adoption as such a perfect simile for the new life in Christ. Once, says Paul, we were children of sin, controlled by our own sinful natures. But God, in His infinite mercy, adopted us. The old life no longer has any power over us. The past is cancelled; its debts wiped away. Instead, we begin a new life in God, heirs to its riches, its servanthood, and its power.

And, as co-heirs with Christ, we also share his ministry of reconciliation. Like him, we are called to lead others into the sunshine of God's love. And, in so doing, we may also find ourselves called to share Christ's suffering. For love can be costly in many ways. And someone has to pay that cost. Yet, as Paul reminds us, "If we share in Christ's sufferings we shall certainly share in his glory." And not just in some future heaven, but in this life, too. As co-heirs of Christ we are

offered a share in the fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Some of us, especially the very young, may not be much concerned about life after death. Not yet at least. But who does not need the earthly part of our inheritance? Who of us already has enough love, enough joy, enough peace? Who of us could not use more patience, more kindness, more self-control? These things, too, are part of the heritage which is offered by God to all who are led by His Spirit.

But please note this point. In Greek, the present tense indicates a continuing action. So what Paul is saying is that sonship; i.e., full inheritance, comes not from accident of birth, nor even from having found and accepted Christ at some time past. Instead it comes to those who live their lives in continual submission to God's Spirit. "As many as continue to be led by the Spirit of God are sons of God . . . and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ. . . ."

Let us remember that as we come to our Lord's table. In the sacrament of communion, many of us find God's presence in a very special way. I hope it will be that way for all of us this morning. But, like those fishermen in my parable, we need more than that. It is not enough just to find God here in this place. It is not enough to feel His Spirit touching our lives for a few brief moments. We need to grab hold of that Spirit and hang on to it for dear life. Hang on to it now, hang on tomorrow, hang on the next day and the next, until at last the perils of the sea are past and we are safely home in port. For we have God's promise that those who do that "are sons of God . . . and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ."