

I

A little more than a year ago, we decided that a household full of three young boys wasn't quite chaotic enough, so we went down to the Humane Society to see about a dog.

Before we went down to the shelter, Amy and I browsed their Web site, and we saw a dog that we thought would be a great fit for our family. She was a beautiful golden lab mix named Honey. She'll be perfect, we thought. She's big enough that she can hang with three rough and tumble boys, but it she would also address the imbalance of male creatures already occupying our house.

But before we took the boys down to the shelter to meet Honey, Amy and I decided that we better meet her first by ourselves. And we saw Honey, and she was indeed a beautiful dog, and I'm sure she went to a great family, but somehow, we knew she wasn't meant to be our dog.

And just as we were getting ready to leave, we saw this other dog in an open pen. He was kind of a weird looking dog - his proportions were kind of funky, and the shelter volunteer told us he was about a three-year-old terrier-chihuahua mix. He had a terrier's long snout but a chihuahua's short floppy ears. His coat was white and grey and somehow both soft and wiry at the same time. His name, according to the shelter, was Bear.

We brought the boys down and made the introductions, and the boys decided that having a dog named Bear Baer was silly, so we renamed him Yogi, and he has made our little family complete.

Yogi is not the smartest dog in the world. He's got a certain cuteness to him, but he's not the cuddliest or most athletic dog, either. He didn't do anything that made him stand out from the other dogs. Somehow, we just knew he was ours, and that's all that mattered to us. We proudly put his new name on his collar, and he's been a member of our family ever since.

II

Today is a feast day within the Christian year called Pentecost. According to the Book of Acts, ten days after Jesus' ascension, the disciples were gathered in Jerusalem, when suddenly the house where they were meeting was filled with a sound like a violent, rushing wind, and something like tongues of flames rested on each of the apostles' foreheads, and each began to speak the gospel in all the known languages of the world at that time.

Sometimes Christians refer to this event as "the birthday of the Church," although the text itself makes no such claims. But what if this event is less about a "birthday" and more about an "adoption day?"

In our second text this morning, we heard a few words from a letter

written by a man named Paul to a group of Christians living in the first century in the city of Rome. And in this part of his letter, Paul uses the metaphor of adoption to describe our relationship with God through Christ.

As both a Jew and a Roman citizen himself, Paul probably knew quite a bit about adoption in both cultural contexts.

In a Jewish context, there was no such thing as adoption. If a child's parents were to die, the Hebrew Scriptures stipulate that the father's brother or oldest living male relative automatically becomes the legal guardian of that child.

But not so in ancient Rome. In ancient Rome, children had no legal rights of their own. In fact, if a child was not desired by his or her parents, it was easy to disown or simply abandon them.

But if a child were to be adopted, then that was a different matter entirely. Under Roman law, adoption was a permanent arrangement -- if a child was adopted, then it was forever -- it was not possible to disown or disinherit an adopted child. Adoption was a permanent change in legal status -- all previously held identities were discarded, and the child was now permanently identified as a member of the adopting family. Furthermore, under Roman law, an adopted child possessed all the same rights of inheritance as any of his or her siblings,

regardless of their blood relationship to the parents.

And so Paul turns to this metaphor of adoption in his letter to the Christians living in Rome. You did not receive a spirit of fear to fall back into slavery, he says, but you have received a spirit of adoption. And the proof of your adoption is that when you cry out to God, it is the very Spirit of God that causes you to call his name.

III

My sister, my brother, you have been adopted by the very Spirit of God, not because you are the smartest or the bravest or the most faithful person in the world. You have been adopted by the Spirit of God not because of because of any accident of geography or DNA. You have been adopted by the Spirit of God simply because God looked at you and said, "That one is mine."

And because you have been adopted by the Spirit of God, your legal status changed forever, and there's no going back. There's been a fundamental change in your very identity.

And what's more - you have proof. The proof of your adoption as a child of God is not your church membership letter. It's not your baptism certificate. Those things are important, but they're not the proof of your status as a child of God.

According to the text, if you call upon the name of God, it's not because

of your church membership status or whether you have received the sacraments of the church or because you took and passed a course. If you call upon the name of God, it's because the Spirit of God is moving in our heart causing you to call God's name. If you call upon the name of God, it's because God has already put God's name on you.

And thank God for that, because did you ever stop and think about how ridiculous this whole story really sounds? Not just this Pentecost text with the sound of a rushing wind and something like tongues of flame and simple Galilean fishermen suddenly able to speak fluent Parthian. I mean, the whole biblical story.

A God who creates everything there is out of nothing. That same God then chooses this one particular family to be his instruments of blessing all the families of the earth – not because they were smarter or stronger or more faithful than any of the other families – just because God put God's name on them and said, "I'm choosing these people for a particular relationship with me that will be fundamentally different than with anyone else."

God puts up all their drama, sending them prophets and priests and kings to call them back to God, but they are a stubborn people, so God decides to live among them and become incarnate. Then God, now in human form and going by the name of Jesus of Nazareth, becomes a man, performs all kinds of

miracles, including walking on water and even bringing people back from the dead, and then he gets arrested by the religious authorities, handed over to the state, and summarily executed. But three days later, he rises from the dead, spends about six weeks teaching and preaching and hanging out with his people, and then he ascends into heaven and tells his disciples, "Wait here, and then the Holy Spirit will tell you what to do next." And then on the day of Pentecost, his disciples are suddenly able to speak all these languages, and the gospel then spreads across the earth and through the centuries.

On its face, the whole biblical story sounds absurd, doesn't it? I can understand why on the first Pentecost, when Peter was finished preaching, some people said, "You guys must be drunk." I can understand why centuries later, a philosopher scoffed and called religion, "The opiate of the people."

Apparently, such reactions are a feature, rather than a bug. Because according to the Apostle Paul, the only way that this story can make any sense in your life, the only way it can do anything for you other than be a fantastic story, is if the Spirit of God is within you. So if you can read and trust the truth of Scripture, if you can pray, if you can call on the name of Jesus, then that's not your mental acuity or personal piety that's causing that to happen – that's the work of the Holy Spirit in your life – that's the proof of your adoption into this family, proof that you are led by

the Spirit of God, and therefore can rightly call yourself a child of God.

And now, here's the really crazy part, because you are a part of this family forever, you've been written into the will. And because you have been adopted by the very Spirit of God, you are a co-heir with none other than Christ himself.

Think about that for a minute. The whole earth is the Lord's says the psalmist. The world and those who live in it. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills. He did not withhold his own Son from us, says Paul. And he has adopted you. He has claimed you and marked you forever. And there is nothing, neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers nor things present nor things to come nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation that can ever take that away. It's a permanent condition.

IV

So the question for us is, how are we going to live differently in light of that incredible news? How are we going to live differently in light of our inheritance? How is it going to change the way we shop? The way we vote? The way we drive? The way we interact with our families? The way we deal with people who are different than us? How is it going to change the way we read the headlines?

We were not given a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear! Lord

knows there's plenty of things to be afraid of these days. And Lord knows that the fallen powers and principalities of this world know how to leverage that fear to sideline people of faith.

But this is the Day of Pentecost. This is not a day for the people of God to be hiding in locked up buildings waiting for the other shoe to drop. Yes, because we bear the name of Christ, we will suffer. That's part of the deal. But that is not the end of the story. We know that Christ has risen above every power that can possibly hope to hurt or divide us, and because of God's abiding grace, we are co-heirs with none other than Christ himself.

So this is a day when we remember that the Spirit has been known to suddenly show up in the places that have been locked up tight to blow the doors right off them. This is a day when we remember that God calls us children of God not so that we'll sit on our hands waiting to receive our inheritance, but so that we might boldly follow the Spirit of God right into the streets, right into the courthouses and statehouses and bars and restaurants and grocery stores and living rooms, boldly and clearly proclaiming God's deeds of power and love in surprising new ways, even if people mock us and call us drunk or worse.

Because we were not given a spirit of fear to fall back into slavery. We were given a spirit of adoption. And we, who are led from this place into the

world by the Spirit of God, are children of God, and if children, then heirs, and if heirs, then co-heirs with Christ himself, both now and forever.

Thanks be to God! Amen.