

The Big Picture: Do You Know Who You Are?
Romans 8:12-17
A sermon preached for Plymouth Presbyterian Church,
St. Helens, Oregon on May 26, 2024
By Rev. Peter J. Blank H.R.

That's our theme for today: Do you know who you are? I am thrilled to be able to tell you by the power vested in me as a minister of the Gospel who you are. You are a child of God.

"When I found that . . . I was a child of God," Maya Angelou once told an interviewer, "when I understood that, when I comprehended that . . . when I internalized that, I became courageous. I dared to do anything that was a good thing."

That's a wonderful statement, isn't it? "When I found that . . . I was a child of God . . . I became courageous. I dared to do anything that was a good thing." If you truly come to believe that you are a child of God, it will change your life.

You need to know that you are not simply the child of an impersonal universe. You are the child of a loving God who watched over you from the day you were born.

That insightful writer Kurt Vonnegut, put it so beautifully in one of his poems:

"God made mud . . . God got lonesome . . . So God said to some of the mud, 'Sit up!' 'See all I've made,' said God, 'the hills, the sea, the sky, the stars.'

"And I was some of the mud that got to sit up and look around . . . Lucky me, lucky mud . . . I, mud, sat up and saw what a nice job God had done . . ." (Kurt Vonnegut, *Cat's Cradle*)

Big Picture: Think of what it means to be God's child.

It means, first of all, that God watches over you. There will never come a time when God will ever stop loving you. Even if you are prone to wander far, far away, God's love for you is secure.

Jesus makes that clear in his parable of a lost son in Luke 15. The son's real indictment was not going away from his father but in the great disrespect he showed his father. He didn't want to wait until his father was deceased to get his inheritance. He wanted his inheritance now! This was almost the equivalent of saying to his father, "I wish you were dead." In the Jewish culture of that day, this would have been unheard of. Despite the boy's waywardness, however, the father never stopped looking for the son's return and there was never any question he would welcome his son home. Can't you see him at the door each afternoon, gazing out searching the horizon? "Do you think he'll come back?" he asks with both sorrow and hope in his heart. "Is he safe?"

Being a child of God is a permanent relationship. We say that our love for our own children, if we are so blessed, will never end. Imagine how much love God is capable of. It's so much that John declared in one of his epistles, "God is love" (1 John 4:8). Love defines God's very nature. This is such a profound truth.

"God's Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ . . ."

Paul writes of our adoption by God. But it is not the kind of adoption we're familiar with. Not only did adoption in Roman society give a child the full rights of a biological child but, because of the vulnerability of the adopted child, the new parents could NEVER abandon that child. They were perpetually responsible for that child from the point of adoption. No wonder Jesus could promise the disciples, "I'll be with you always . . ." (Matt 28:20b). We are children

of God and the Holy Spirit testifies to this fact. As children of God we are heirs of God, beneficiaries of all of His power and resources (Ephesians 1:3) and joint heirs with Christ. In many families children inherit their parents' estate; each child is an heir and the children together are joint heirs. So with all fellow believers we are joint heirs of all that God has to give.

I am convinced that the biggest problem in many peoples' lives today is that they do not know who they are. Their true identity is a mystery to them.

Father Greg Boyle is a Jesuit priest who works with gang members in East Los Angeles. Father Boyle has put together a team of physicians trained in the laser technology of tattoo removal. The team is part of a program that takes the tattoos of ex-gang members and wipes the slate clean. For many, it is as crucial a service as it is merciful. To a former gang member, the gang tattoo fosters the attitude that the gang's claim on that person's life is permanent. It is a mark of ownership as much as identity. The process of tattoo removal is extremely painful. Patients describe the laser procedure as feeling like hot grease on their skin. Yet the waiting list grows of those who will put up with whatever pain it takes to be transformed, to receive a new identity. (Jim Birchfield. Cited by John A. Huffman Jr., <http://www.preaching.com/sermons/11600669/>)

If you don't know who you are, you are apt to take on a false identity. You take on the identity of any group that you are with. And before long you define yourself by that new false identity: A gang banger, a drug user, an adulterer, a racist, a materialist, a narcissist there are a host of enslaving tendencies in our society. Physical tattoos may be the easiest of the signs of slavery to remove, for they are simply removed from our skin. What about those signs of slavery that are tattooed on our souls?

Do you know who you are? **The day you understand that you are a child of God is the day you will learn what true meaning/true living is all about.**

A young clergywoman named Vicki Flippin tells about a retreat she once attended led by a woman named Tilda Norberg. At one point, Tilda asked the attendees to do something called "Speaking Truth to Lies." She asked them to write down two or three lies about themselves that they needed to get rid of. Not ridiculous lies like: "My hair is blonde" or "I'm a professional body builder," but the kind of lies we tell ourselves lies that we know in our head are not true, but that our hearts hang onto.

Lies like:

- "If I weigh more than 120 lbs, no one will find me attractive."
- Or this one: "Because I can no longer move the way I used to, I will never be whole or well again."
- Or this: "I don't have a problem with drugs or alcohol."
- Or this: "If I weren't so needy or noisy or nosy, the abuse would stop."

These are lies, says Vicki Flippin, "that we live our lives by. Lies that we die little deaths by." These are the kinds of lies Tilda asked them to write down. And then she had them get into groups and to share some of the lies about themselves they had written.

Vickie shared two of her own lies with the group. The two lies that held her in captivity were "I am not as important as my colleagues" and "My worth is dependent on what other people think of me." Can anyone relate to those two lies?

Vickie says that in her group there was a young Nigerian pastor named Michael. Michael later told her that, as a black man, when he sat in meetings with all-white pastors, he struggled with the same lies as Vickie "I am not as important as my colleagues" and "My worth is dependent on what other people think of me."

Michael held the written version of Vickie's lies in his hands, and he looked straight into Vickie's eyes, and he said words like these, "Vicki, I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that these are lies; that you are created in the image of God; and that Jesus Christ abides in you and you abide in Christ. And this is where you get your worth. I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you are every bit as much a child of God as anyone . . . I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you will bear fruit for God, through the power of God that is within you."

Then he handed Vickie the two pieces of paper on which those lies were written. She says she ripped them into pieces, and threw them on the floor to show herself and everyone in the room that the power of God was removing those lies from her life.

(http://www.youngclergywomen.org/the_young_clergy_women_pr/2010/03/spring-pruning-a-sermon-on-john-1518.html.)

Can you sense the power in that little exercise?

The world tells us many, many lies about who we are loser, unlovable, unworthy, incapable, deficient. And before long we are telling those lies to ourselves. We need to replace those lies with God's truth about us we are children of the Most High God. We are loved with an everlasting love that gives us worth and confidence and a sense of purpose in life. We can walk through life with heads held high because of the One who calls us God's own.



Many of us know the Disney Studio's animated movie *Toy Story*. Two of the characters are Woody, a toy cowboy and Buzz Lightyear, a "space ranger" action figure. Early in the movie Woody confronts Buzz Lightyear with the fact that he is not really a space hero. Woody shouts, "You're not a space ranger! You're an action figure, a child's plaything."

After failing in an attempt to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody's statement. Grief-stricken and disillusioned, Buzz hangs his head in resignation, declaring, "I'm just a stupid, little, insignificant toy."

Later in the movie Woody tries to undo the damage he has done. He seeks to comfort his friend by underscoring the love of the boy who owns them both. He says to Buzz, "You must not be thinking clearly. Look, over in that house, there's a kid who thinks you're the greatest, and it's not because you're a space ranger; it's because you're his."

As Buzz lifts his foot, he sees in black permanent ink is the name of Andy to whom he belongs. Seeing the image of his owner, Buzz breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination and confidence. He knows Andy treasures him deeply. (Craig Brian Larson and Andrew Zahn, *Movie-Based Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching*)

As we leave this sanctuary today, check your feet. You will see your Maker's mark there.

- **God watches over you**
- **The biggest problem in many peoples' lives today is that they do not know who they are.**
- **The day you understand that you are a child of God is the day you will learn what true meaning/true living is all about.**

Get the BIG picture! Go with a new determination and confidence because of the One who has adopted you as God's own child. "For those who are led by the Spirit of God are the children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba (Papa, Da) Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children . . ."