

(Bill Watterson, *Calvin and Hobbes*)

Sometimes we don't fit in. It could be our family of origin, our circle of friends, with neighbours or places of work, maybe even church, moments of friction between personalities become so pronounced that we declare *I'm related to people I don't relate to*.

Paul in his letter to the Romans was feeling this struggle as he considered his relationship with both Christians and Jews in Biblical Palestine. Once a Pharisee (Acts 26), Paul went around the countryside hunting for Christians, in order to preserve the piety of the Jewish faith. Because of his role, he obviously wasn't welcomed by Christians – but I doubt he was all that embraced by his Jewish sisters and brothers either. It's like having a police officer in the family. Or a minister. People think they need to sit a little taller, to watch their words a little better, and heaven help if you reach for something cold on a hot day. Paul never felt like he fit in, so that when he (*literally*) saw the light after being blinded after meeting the risen Christ after realizing that his actions towards the people of the Way/Christians was destructive, he might have thought that 'finally, I'll find my people with these followers of Jesus.' His welcome was far from open-armed. Those that met him were afraid of him (Acts 9:26). They didn't trust him, with the history he had. Yet, they were compelled by his story, and his deep call and change of heart, both helping to make Paul an important figure to early Christianity, second to Jesus.

In those feelings of being *related to people I don't relate to*, Paul knew well abandonment and loneliness, yet he found that it didn't pain his soul. In his moment of conversion, Paul's heart was forever changed to recognize God's unceasing presence. The feelings of not fitting in didn't bother him as much. God loved him, and that love was enough.

All of that is background to his writings to the Roman church, where he's processed some of that pain to come out the other side. This is reflected by our today, starting at chapter 8 verse twelve, describing God's loving choice to give us a place to belong. And if the minister chose the correct translation of scripture for the day, then Paul's point would be more apparent, so let us hear verse 15, and 18 again:

*¹⁵For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a spirit of **adoption**. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" ... ¹⁸we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for **adoption**, the redemption of our bodies.*

That word adoption stuck out like a tall tree in the middle of the open prairie, a very modern word in an otherwise older-sounding text.



I'll admit my own bias of being comfortable with the image of being *children of God*, sidestepping while still acknowledging the challenging past obsessions with power indifference and patriarchy. Knowing that, Paul speaks intimately of his connection with God, detailing a relationship into which we're invited. While our families of origin are not always the best example of it, while our circle of friends, with neighbours or in places of work as even church struggles to live up to it, God loves us unconditionally, as a parent *should* love their child. An unending patience. A determined growth mindset. A well of limitless compassion.

When you put all of that through the lens of adoption, it adds a powerful new dimension.

In my second-hand experience of adoption through friends and the congregations I've served...adoption is a process – a long process filled with interviews, research gathering,

determination of whether or not there's a match, sometimes ending before it begins. If the couple passes the rigorous scrutiny, all of it hinges then on what children are available. Couples are given details about the children waiting placement, and too often than not, discussions focus on what history, conditions, ailments, or pre-existing struggles the child might be bringing with them. This might be the end of the line for some families looking to adopt.

Worrying about a future yet unwritten affects us all – as the gift of our imaginations turns in on itself, with every eventuality playing out in technicolour in our minds. We focus on the horrors of what *could* happen. We obsess about tomorrow and what may play out to the point of shutting down. So this becomes the end for some hoped-to-be-parents, who struggle to imagine the wellbeing of their not-yet child.

Though for some, amazingly, with eyes wide open, some almost-parents make a deliberate choice to give children a place to belong. A people they can call their family.



Mohamed Bzeek cradling one of his children

I remember reading a story about six years ago about Mohamed Bzeek¹ in Los Angeles who has fostered and adopted terminally ill children, opening his heart to over 80 children since 1989. He sees the work as an extension of his faith, that as a Muslim,

¹ <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/tapestry/finding-solace-1.4063675/meet-the-man-who-only-fosters-terminally-ill-children-1.4066405>

Bzeek says caring for those who are so ill is a painful process. He knows their time together is precious. "I know it's heartbreak. I know it's a lot of work and I know it's going to hurt me sometimes. You know, I feel sad. But, in my opinion, we should help each other, you know?"

If these aren't the words of God, I don't know what are. That life is a painful process, with our time together precious. It's heartbreak, it's a lot of work, and it's going to hurt sometimes.² But...we should help each other.

This is what Paul calls adoption, as God chooses to adopts us. The process is much more streamlined, as God knows what history, conditions, ailments, or pre-existing struggles we are bringing with us. God knows what a mess you are. Sorry. What a mess I am. How I don't always get things right. How I sometimes make things worse. How things eat at me, coming out in the form of anxious nail biting or sleepless nights. God sees all that you and I would rather hide away, those things that make us less-than-ideal candidates for adoption, and amazingly, with eyes wide open, God makes a deliberate choice to give us a place to belong. A people we can call our family.

Life is a painful process, and our time together is precious. It's full of heartbreak, it's a lot of work, and it's going to hurt sometimes, but this is the world to which God comes. These are the pain bodies that Jesus incarnates within. To people like Paul and you and I, we are entrusted with this gospel of life-giving love where sometimes it gets used and abused and twisted by our own history, conditions, ailments, or pre-existing struggles. But it persists, sometimes in spite of us. All because of God's choice. God's loving choice to see all that we are, and adopt us anyways.

The greatest gift that you can
give to others is the gift of
unconditional love and
acceptance.

BRIAN TRACY

² <https://www.image.ie/self/mohamed-bzeek-156982>

And the problem with modern Christianity is that too often we stop there. That the whole of the gospel becomes uniquely fulfilled in you – that you are God’s personal pet project. Instead, the **whole** creation is eagerly waiting to experience that same unconditional love and acceptance. To be chosen – to be adopted.

Instead, we spend so much of our lives seeing the specks in other people’s eyes, recognizing and obsessing over *their* faults, spending countless hours gossiping and complaining about someone else’s history, conditions, ailments, and pre-existing struggles that we shut down any potential relationship with others because they’re not as perfect as we pretend we are. For the whole creation is waiting for the *revelation of God’s children* to take the unconditional love and acceptance that we’ve experienced and offer it to others. To make it not about us individually, but us collectively.

This is what made Paul so compelling. His life was an example of God’s choice to call him and compel him to preach love in order to invite others on the journey. This is what transformed Mohamed Bzeek’s life, to step into the middle of heartbreak, and offer love and a place to belong knowing that it does little to alleviate the pain, if only to make it more bearable.

It’s what our world is waiting to see from us. We who profess faith are called to share our lives in ways that wipe out human divisions that we spend so much of our time reinforcing, be they religious differences, politics, nationalities, race, gender, sexuality. There’s so much unhealthy anger these days. People are hurting financially, physically, and mentally, and it’s easy to turn on one another, to blame one another, to see everything as a divisive issue when it’s not. For we who profess faith are called to adopt this world to acknowledge all its problems and yet see the potential we have when we work together. For this world and the people in it, is deserving of love – loving as God first loved us – adopting it as God first adopted us. We who profess faith, are called to embody this blessing from the *Black Rock Prayer Book*, that³

The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful for anything but love.

May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

Your ears, so you hear the cry of the poor.

May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament.

Your lips, so you speak nothing but the truth with love.

May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.

*And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire,
that your love, **your love**, changes everything.*

³ <https://www.ees1862.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/A-Black-Rock-Prayer-Book-2019.pdf>