

Galatians 4:4-7
December 31, 2023

Heirs

Here we are on New Year's Eve. It is almost 2024. It is hard to believe. We are in the Christmas season and have worked through Advent, in which we have told the story of Christ's birth. In Luke's gospel, the infancy narratives, as they are called, are concluded with the presentation of Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem for his dedication and circumcision.

There are two stories; one of Simeon, who had prayed to see the Lord's Messiah before his time was up, and at the sight of Jesus spoke the words of the Nunc Dimitis,

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.
30 For my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

And the prophetess Anna in her old age, gave thanks to God and spoke about the child Jesus who would be the redemption of Jerusalem.

But it is the text from Galatians that caught my attention this week, in thinking about what to say on the last day of the year, and just before New Year's Day. So let us concentrate on this text, which tells us that we are children of God, and not only children, but heirs with Christ.

I must confess that I am attracted to it for reasons that are probably in the weeds somewhat, a little technical, but never mind, it will only take up a little time. Indulge me for a few minutes as I chase this rabbit about inheritance. What does it mean that we are children, and heirs?

In modern times, inheritance has lost some of its kick. We have noted before how most of the countries in the world no longer use it to choose their leaders, at least not directly. And most families will divide things evenly when passing the estate down to the next generation, rather than favoring the oldest child.

Another word for the favoring the firstborn, is patriarchy, which was the way the world of Jesus was organized, and which has begun to break down in the last few hundred years. We have seen the advent of democracies and other kinds of republics, and the rise of equality-based civil rights movements for the better inclusion of more people, into the life of the world.

Since, however, the bible was written in the days when monarchies and patriarchy were in their heyday, it is helpful for the interpretation of the bible, to talk about the way things used to be. In other words, before we speak of the meaning of *this* text in our times, it is good to acknowledge its meaning in its own time.

The general idea in the world ordered by inheritance, is that a pyramid was established, all those at the bottom of the pyramid served those at the top. More specifically, the oldest son (more often than not it was

the oldest male, not the daughters) was *the* heir, meaning the wealth and authority would be inherited by him, and he would become the patriarch of the next generation. Everyone else in the household lived under his authority.

Along with the authority came responsibility. The patriarch, or father, was responsible for the well-being of the entire household, or in the case of a king, for the entire kingdom. There was a conflict of interest between the exercise of power and the enjoyment of wealth, with its enticements, and the responsibility to the rest of the family. Often the emphasis would be weighted in the direction of the power and the wealth, at the expense of the responsibility. In the mind of Jesus, things should be different.

A reading from the gospels help. In Matthew, after the mother of James and John (the sons of Zebedee) had requested the highest position for them in the kingdom that Jesus was about to establish (causing the indignation of the other ten disciples), according to Matthew;

“Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave— just as *the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve*, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Here we are confronted with a challenging message, because the role of the firstborn in God’s realm is different than it is in the world. For as in the world the wealthy and powerful are prone to self-promotion and the advancement of their own power, and the preservation of their own wealth, at the expense of their subjects, Jesus, God’s only begotten, came to give his life as a kind of payment; to die a sacrifice, so that the people could live, and thrive.

In this sense, the role of the heir is the opposite of how it often played out in the old aristocracies. Instead of demanding that everyone spend themselves on the king, Jesus is convinced that what makes him a king is his role to spend *himself up* for everyone else.

This is not only the foundation of the idea of “servant leadership,” but it is a gospel proclamation of a new way of living. Now, by giving attention to the role of the firstborn in a society that has a monarchy; with its caste system and built-in inequities, Jesus, and Paul, and the Bible, is neither affirming their arrangement, nor rejecting it. Rather, they are helping people understand how to live their lives within it.

The general message is that the way to thrive against the inequities of the system is through healthy personal relationships characterized by mutual concern and love for one another, and by having the mind of a servant, which is to say, to follow after the example of Jesus.

In the present situation, the old way of governing *has* been in decline. Yet we still find ourselves living in a world threatened by disorder, and by sometimes harsh circumstances for large numbers of people.

I am under the impression that people thought, certainly I have thought, that the advent of democracy was inherently better than monarchy, *because* it was more inclusive and fair, more just, simply by its nature. And I still believe that it is. I believe the same thing about an open and free society based on equality and freedom and to lift up as many people as possible.

But there is no evidence that democracy does away with violence, nor does it solve every problem associated with power or answer every question. It does not solve the problem caused by sin or necessarily produce higher character.

So let us get down to the crux of the matter. The first message this morning is that by the grace of God, through faith, *we are all God's family*. In the Galatians text read today, Paul distinguishes again between the social status of a servant, or slave, and the sons, the difference between *not being* a part of the family, and *being* a part of the family;

“So you are no longer a servant, but God’s child.” And now we have been told as well, “since you are God’s child, *God has made you also an heir.*”

It is the job of the heir to die a sacrifice for the people, which means to serve. Sounds different when put that

way. Here we are in the middle of the Christmas season, and thinking about the year past, and contemplating a new one.

Let us begin the new year with this gospel message on our minds, that *we are God's family*, and even though being the first born does not for us have exactly the same meaning as it did before, we are also heirs; and with that comes many blessings; let it also be the source of our character and goodness and concern for others, after the example and the sacrifice of Jesus, whose birth we have celebrated.

May God bless 2024.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)