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"Faith Unfolded: 'Adopted by God'"

Rev. Jim Wood

Good morning, Church. My name is Jim Wood and I love Jesus as my Lord and Savior. It is an honor to be with you and I hope that whether you've been with for thousands of times or whether this is your first time with our family that you will experience something of the transforming power of Christ in your life today.

We have concluded a ten-week series on the Ten Commandments and a number of you have been asking so I want to let you know that those are now available for you in print form and there is a pile of them up here on the stage so at the end of the service if you want to pick any of those up and take one, share it with somebody, whatever you might do however the Lord might lead you in being able to share our worship experience with others.

We are now in the second week of a new five-week series on the principles of the Reformed or Presbyterian tradition, what was traditionally called "five-point Calvinism." The acronym was "T-U-L-I-P." We've taken it and turned it just a touch. It is exactly the same principles but in order to make an acronym that seems to work for us I think in today's world perhaps better we are using the notion of "F-A-I-T-H," "F-A-I-T-H Unfolded." Last week we looked at our sense of being "Fallen Humanity." Today we are looking at the "A" in faith, which is to be "Adopted by God."

In order to consider that we are going to look at two passages. One is in the 10th chapter of Deuteronomy and the other is in the first chapter of Ephesians. Context here is important. Deuteronomy is literally the second giving of the law. It is presented by Moses towards the end of the journey. We can't call it a pilgrimage; we have to just call it the stupid walk of our ancestors for forty years in the wilderness, when they were too thick-skulled to get it. Now they are about to enter into the Promised Land and Moses is rearticulating what the law is, or what God's love and grace is for them. The Ten Commandments show up twice; the 20th chapter of Exodus is what we looked at when we went through our series. They also show up in the 10th chapter of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomy it is really amazing because what happens is Moses goes up on the mount has this incredible encounter with God and he comes back with these ten commands. As he comes down he realizes that the people have already turned away. They've gone as the old text used to say "whoring after other gods." They've become idolaters; they've turned away from God's presence in their lives. They're complaining and bickering and all of these things have come into their lives. Moses is so upset with them that he literally takes the Ten Commandments, the two stone tablets, and smashes them to symbolize to them their own breaking of the law.

I'm convinced that when we reach that day when we all go to heaven and we're all pulled up together in that great gathering and communion of saints and Moses gets there even by the blood of Christ. Moses, who predated the earthly Jesus, gets there. I'm convinced that Moses is going

to get the award, if there are any awards there, for patience. He just puts up with these people over and over and over. But you see Moses is patient because God is patient. God keeps coming back and saying, "Moses, you know I know we are tired of them, I know they betrayed us, I know they've turned away, but I'm not giving up on them." Moses literally rewrites the Ten Commandments on two tablets and he brings it to the people again and he re-presents it to the people. As he does it, he expands upon it, or perhaps that's not the right way to put it. He's not expanding upon it, he narrows it in and he gives other teaching that focuses on what's really at stake and what really matters. You'll see in this passage today that Moses presents to them from God a command to do certain things, to care for people, for the orphan and the widow, to care for the stranger. It's also a passage that sounds very much like the New Testament when it says "to circumcise your heart." Your life now is not just about following these commands or these rules outside, but it is literally a calling to internalize God's love and His law.

Let's look at that passage in Deuteronomy.

Old Testament Reading – Deuteronomy 10:12-22

So, now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul,

and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.

Although heaven and the heaven of heavens belong to the LORD your God, the earth with all that is in it,

yet the LORD set his heart in love on your ancestors alone and chose you, their descendants after them, out of all the peoples, as it is today.

Circumcise then, the foreskin of your heart, and do not be stubborn any longer.

For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who is not partial and takes no bribe,

who executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and who loves the strangers, providing them food and clothing.

You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

You shall fear the LORD your God; him alone you shall worship; to him you shall hold fast, and by his name you shall swear.

He is your praise; he is your God, who has done for you these great and awesome things that your own eyes have seen.

Your ancestors went down to Egypt seventy persons; and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars in heaven.

Now in the New Testament, in the Letter to the Ephesian Church. I believe Paul wrote this letter toward the end of his ministry as he is speaking to the Ephesians about what the body of Christ really is to be, what the issues of the church are and how it is that we are to live together and what our grounding is. We find in the very first chapter as is normal in a Greek letter, sort of a formula that is followed, but Paul expands upon this initial sort of complimentary portion of the letter and he gets to the very heart of what we want to say throughout the Letter of Ephesians. The word “grace” is used 12 times in this letter. All but one of those 12 times it’s used it is used in relationship to God’s love, God’s grace, God’s power that comes upon us and so it is in this passage.

New Testament Reading – Ephesians 1:3-14

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,

just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.

He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will,

to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace

that he lavished on us. With all wisdom and insight

he has made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he set forth in Christ,

as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

In Christ Jesus we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will,

so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;

this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God's own people, to the praise of his glory.

I've been into a book for about a week now called *The Bottom Billion*. The subtitle is *Why the Poorest Countries are Failing and What Can be Done About It*. It's written by a man named Paul Collier. Paul Collier is a professor of economics at Oxford and has been in one of the top echelons at the World Bank and is a leading expert in African policy. He's trying to take the issue of poverty in the horrible places in the world with illness and poverty and break it down a little bit differently than other people like Jeffrey Sachs or others. He's looking at what he says are the "bottom billion," the one billion poorest people, the one billion people most affected by the issues of poverty in the world. What he finds is that those one billion are in about 50 countries, most of those or many of those in Africa. He's trying to find some commonalities in those nations. He's trying to look and see what it is that is happening there that might give us a glimpse of how to bring remedy to it. Towards the beginning in the first couple of chapters he says something very, very simple and yet for me important. He says, "73% of people in the societies of the bottom billion have recently been through a civil war or are still in one." 73% of the poorest billion people in the world live in nations that have had a civil war recently or are in one.

This whole idea that we grew up, or certainly I grew up in my generation, with the Cold War and the idea that it was going to be a nuclear deterrent or there was going to be a nuclear war that was going to create the largest havoc in the world is certainly not what we are experiencing today. It's almost as if war has gone back to some of its earlier forms, people fighting people within their own communities, or one community against another, or one tribe against another, or one form of belief against another. I read this summer that the Kalashnikov rifles, that sort of ubiquitous weapon *du jour* for rebellion in the world today, not too many years ago were actually made smaller so that they would fit the hands of children. Hundreds of thousands, hundreds of thousands of children who are raised up to slaughter, to assassinate, to kill people from their own nation, people from their own community, and in some places and in some times, people in their own families.

We look at foreign policy and I don't want to speak at all about the rightness or the wrongness of whether we should or should not have gone into Iraq, that's for you to wrestle with. But, what do you do now? You look at a nation that's killing each other because of different ways of believing the Muslim faith should be lived out, or different historical realities that go back generations and generations. Do you pull out? Is that the right thing to do? If we do, do we leave that to then a much more bloody civil war? We lift up and we should be praying for all of those soldiers who are affected and families whose soldiers are dying in Iraq, but the reality is there are so many more civilians, Iraqis, who are being killed by their own people.

Maybe that shouldn't surprise us so much. We talked last week about "fallen humanity," "total depravity" in the classic terms. We are all sinful people. We looked at the Garden of Eden and we looked at Adam and Eve and we said that was original sin, but we also noticed in an aside that the word "sin" didn't appear there in that passage in Genesis. In fact, the first time the word "sin"

is used is not in the Garden of Eden when they eat of the fruit of the tree, but it is when Cain and Abel are in conflict and brother kills brother. It should not really come to us as any surprise that the very first murder took place within a family.

It wouldn't surprise Moses either. Moses was a man of great patience, and yet Moses was also one who really saw things as they were. He didn't have a choice. He looked at his people and he had one amazingly dysfunctional group of people, one amazingly dysfunctional family that was following along with him. As soon as he would just walk away to go and get a special revelation from God, as had been tried, the people had witnessed this over and over with Moses. He went away and he brought something great back to them, but as soon as he goes away it seems like they fall back. They fall into their old selves; they fall into a life of idolatry and sinfulness. They are a family that is just messed up. Yet, the text says, "Yet the LORD set his heart on your ancestors alone and chose you out of all the peoples." There is something about this God of ours that still keeps choosing us even when we fall away. There is something about this God of ours that still keeps choosing to love us, choosing to be in relationship with us, choosing us.

I was thinking about this the other day. When Sheryl and I were dating we were in our early 20's, and at that point I was still in school in South Carolina and Sheryl was taking classes at Julliard in New York. Her roommate, a friend of hers, was dancing in the New York Ballet and they had a sweet little apartment on East 57th Street. It was a rent controlled thing and it was a great deal. I decided to go up the first year that we were dating. We had only been dating a few months. I decided to go up for spring break. I was a country bumpkin. I had never been on a plane, really hadn't been too far out of South Carolina. I was much more comfortable with a shotgun on my shoulder, of course maybe that would have worked in New York, too (laughter). We had some friends that we were visiting and it was just a great time. I will never forget that about the fourth day into the trip I went over to Sheryl's apartment to pick her up. We were going to go out to eat. I had found a place and made reservations. Sheryl comes to the door and says, "I'll be there in just a minute." She goes into the bedroom and she closes the door and I start to hear all of this rustling around, movement and sliding of stuff. I waited and then I tapped on the door and said, "Sheryl, we've got reservations." She said, "I'll be right there." I heard more sliding and movement, metal on metal kind of thing. I said, "Sheryl, Sheryl." You know what Sheryl was doing; she was getting ready for the date.

I've got to ask you this. How many of you women have spent at least fifteen minutes getting ready for a date? How many of you women have spent thirty minutes getting ready for a date? How many of you women have spent more time getting ready for the date than the date lasted (laughter) or that you wanted the date to last? I'm not exaggerating. One hour later Sheryl came out. Sheryl's not here; she's coming at 11:00. I want to stop and say something here and I'm serious about this. When you come to worship I expect you to have integrity, so anything I say about Sheryl you'd better not dare tell her what I had to say (laughter) or you will have lost your integrity and you don't want to do that.

I didn't really see that she looked any different than when she went in (laughter). She was always beautiful. But, here's the thing. We missed our reservation and we just walked on the streets of New York. We found a place; I'll never forget it. It's not there any more. It was a place called The Monastery. We went in and I can tell you what it looked like, where we sat, I can tell you what the texture of the wall was, I can tell you what it smelled like. I can tell you what the waiter was wearing and the first sentence he said to us. I can tell you the scent that Sheryl had on. I remember almost every single thing about that experience. Why? Because in her spending that much time to get ready for me, she let me know that I was worth something. She let me know

that I was worth something and that she chose me. That's what it is when God chooses; it's His love, His grace, His presence.

You see it gets even better when God chooses us because God doesn't choose to date us to check us out. God doesn't choose to date us and say, "I'm going to see what his table manners are like or I'm going to see whether he's going to make enough money." I lost on both on those, but she still stuck with me. God doesn't say, "I'm going to wait and see how this really turns out, see if it's a really good match." No. When God chooses us God literally calls us into His family. That's why I love the language in Ephesians. We call it in the traditional language "Unconditional Election." How boring is that? "Unconditional election" – it's like being elected with "no chad" I think (laughter), but it doesn't really grab me. But when you start to think about the Biblical language in Ephesians, "He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us." He destined us for adoption as His children through Jesus Christ. When God chooses us He calls us into His family. That's what it is to be a believer of Christ. It's not to be with a certain religion, it's not to belong to a certain group, it's to be in the family of God.

Here's a little aside. I think we really have missed one of the greatest earthly contributions that Jesus Christ ever gave to us. What I mean by this I'm talking about the earthly ministry of Christ. I think we've missed perhaps the greatest contribution because what we do is we focus on the miracles; we focus on the big things. We try to get people to believe in Jesus because we say, "He did these miracles, so you've got to believe - fed 5,000 people, walked across water, healed people, so you've got to believe." I'm not sure that works too well in evangelism anyway, but we focus on all these great miracles and we should. They are powerful things. Do you know what I think Jesus really did in his earthly life? This is the contribution before He died and was raised. The Lord's Prayer shows up twice in the New Testament. It shows up in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, and it shows up in the 11th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. In Matthew when Jesus gives the prayer, He's giving a sermon to people. He says, "Go into your prayer cell, go into your closet, go into your room, go by yourself and pray like this.

Then in Luke, it's really even more interesting. In Luke it's really kind of cool because what happens is the disciples of Jesus come to Him and they say, "Jesus, John's people got a prayer. They branded it. They're known for their prayer. It's like T-shirts. We've got nothing, Jesus. We've got no T-shirts, we've got no belt buckles, we've got nothing. Give us a prayer." Jesus says, "Okay. When you pray, pray like this." I think the first phrase is the most important part of that prayer. In Matthew remember He says, "Go and pray by yourself." But what does He say? When you pray by yourself pray, "Our Father." Why would you go and pray by yourself and pray "our"? Because any time you pray to God you are praying as a gathered family. Even when you are alone your prayers are being bound by the entire family of God.

The thing that is more interesting in it to me, not just that plural notion, is that Jesus says pray, "Our Father." "Father" is the language that Jesus uses in His relationship with the Father over and over and over. He gives us permission to use the same intimate language that He does in His intimacy within the Trinity with God, the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. Now, don't miss this. Don't miss this. Remember in the Old Testament we always talk about it when it is "L-O-R-D" that word really is "Yahweh." The belief was if you said the word you would be smitten right there. God would kill you. You can't use God's name and live, but when you get to the New Testament through Jesus, He says, "Not only can you say it, but this is the name you use. This is the name, 'Father.'" This is the intimacy of life; this is the closest relationship that you will find.

I'm going to go from preaching to meddling in a minute because it disturbs me that so much of the modern church wants to say "Oh, that's sexist language. Sexist language. We've got to avoid it. Let's use other images, let's not use that." It's not a metaphor – it's a name and Jesus says, "Use the name." When you use the name you are brought in this amazing way, you are literally brought into the same type of relationship that Jesus has. Don't forfeit the name of God, the relationship with God simply to be politically correct or theologically modern. This is what Jesus does for us. He gives us the entrance into the very intimate relationship of family. You and I are chosen by this God. You and I are not only chosen, but we are adopted into this family. We are called in in the very real way that makes us one in family with the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. That's what adoption does.

You know in adoption the children don't decide, the parents do. The parents come. Adoption doesn't happen by the child walking around saying, "I'm a cute little boy and I'm going to walk through here and decide which of you are going to be my parents." The parents come, the parents decide, the parents choose and when that happens the family is brought together. You don't choose God. God doesn't come and say, "I'm going to give you a test here. I'm going to run it past you and see if you still like it. Or, I'm going to say "Here I am, here I am." No, God chooses us, calls us into family.

That image for me is seared in my mind because of something that many of us saw last year. Last year James and Valena Hoy adopted Abigail on the 16th of August in China. If you've been with us for a while you'll know that the gestation period for this adoption was longer than an elephant (laughter). We prayed for that little girl and for James and Valena it seemed like for years. It finally happened on August 16th. This was always one of the most powerful things for me, when they finally got her and held her. Do you think the moment that happened that little girl was brought into their family?

Abigail is a beautiful little girl. She is a year older now. I call her "Princess." I know that's not politically correct either, but I'm still going to do it until her Mom and Dad won't let me do it anymore. You could say that Abigail has "attitude." When she walks around she's got an attitude. She goes where she wants to go and she does what she wants to do. You could say it is attitude, but to me it's really so much more. It's a little girl who's walking with dignity, a little girl walking with the dignity of a princess. It's an amazing thing. The other thing that's amazing about it is that Abigail was born in China. James and Valena do not look Chinese (laughter), but it has really been interesting. Abigail has really been taking on a lot of her Mom's and Dad's characteristics, particularly her Mom's characteristics. Some people might call it determination; I might call it hardheadedness (laughter). Some people might say it's just a shared artistic interest. Some people might say it's a way that they hold their heads. You could get into an argument about nature versus nurture all you want to, but this is what I know. That little girl is claiming the characteristics of two people who love her to death, and it's the same thing for you and me.

When you and I are adopted into the family of God, when God chooses us, we are given the same opportunity to grow in the characteristics of that God, of that Father, of that relationship. We are given the same opportunity to take on the characteristics of grace and of love and of forgiveness. That's what makes us the family of God; that's what binds us together. It's not just to say we have one common father or that we are all sisters and brothers, but to say we are literally drawn into the characteristics of this God and this God of love and grace and power and majesty starts to imprint His life upon us and our lives are never the same when that happens. It's never anything that you and I choose, but it is something that is chosen for us when He adopted us, when He called us as Ephesians says. It goes back to the notion with Jeremiah, "Even before I formed you

in the womb I called you.” Even before the beginning of the world, for all eternity, this God has adopted you, He has loved you, and He has called you into His family. You might run away, you might try to kick and scream, you might try to move against it, but He still loves you. He is still your Father. A father’s love will never ever give up on a child.

Years ago some friends really wrestled with their oldest son. He had gone through serious bouts with drug abuse and all different types of things. Finally in his mid-twenties he killed himself. This family had two younger daughters, beautiful girls, high achievers, great, great girls. After their son’s death they just spent some time and reflected and prayed and tried to sort through all of that. Finally things in their family seemed to find a sense of peace, as much as it could come, and it was reaching a point where it seemed like they were ready to retire. The girls were just doing great. Lo and behold they adopted a two-year old little boy from a very, very troubled background. At a time when you thought “It’s time for them to slow down. They’ve been through enough. They’ve been through the war. They’ve got beautiful daughters,” they adopt this little boy. This little boy was rough. He had been treated rough. He had gone through rough experiences and this family, the girls, the mother and father just loved him and loved him and loved him and held him and held him and loved him and forgave him and chose him and chose him over and over and over, but nothing seemed to settle in for him. He never seemed to quite grasp that; he just seemed to be a rebellious child, even in the preschool age. He was trouble, so much trouble that many people, many friends thought “Should they keep him? Are they able to care for this little boy?” They just stayed with it. They just stayed with it. It never seemed to get better.

Finally five years into this the family throws a party and invites some close friends over. There in the midst of the party they gather everybody in the living room. They sit down; the father and mother stand up. They call the little boy. The little boy’s name is Jimmy. They call Jimmy up and said, “Jimmy, come here and sit down. Here is a special chair where we want you to sit.” Jimmy was fidgeting but he finally decided to sit down. “Jimmy, we have welcomed you into our family, we have loved you, we have received you, and we have forgiven you. We’ve done everything we can to show our love to you. I want to say right now in front of all these people. I want to say this. Jimmy, you will no longer be called Jimmy. That is no longer your name. From this time forward your name will always be Harry, Junior.” For this little boy his dad literally went and had his name changed to be the name that his father who had adopted him had.

We heard from some friends not too long ago. Harry, Jr. is now a young officer in the Marine Corps, married, beautiful children. Something happened in that experience for him. Something happened that finally let him know, that for all the ways his family tried to express it, something finally happened to let him know that he was loved and he was accepted, and he would never be sent away. It’s the same thing for you. When you come into the family your name is changed. When you come into the family you become a child of the King. You become part of royalty. It’s not a royalty that earns great honors and accolades in the world; it’s a royalty that would lay its life down for its people.

Our Father has called you into His family today, not because you’ve earned it or deserved it, but in spite of it. Our Father has called you into His family. That’s what it means to be part of this family. The family that matters the most in all of life is the reality of this family, the family of God, even more than all of the love and all of the affection that we have in our nuclear families and our biological families. All of that is nothing compared to the family of God where we are the chosen people, chosen not for success but chosen for a purpose, for service. Chosen to care for the widow, chosen to care for the orphan, chosen to care for those who are strangers, chosen

to be the people of God to live our lives. When we are called into the family of God we are called into the family that has a purpose, and our purpose today is lived out in sharing the gospel of love and grace. The thing that is so amazing about it is that when you are called into this family you know you never cease to be surprised because we are all adopted. We don't all look the same. We come from different backgrounds. We come from different experiences. We look different. We come from different places around the world, but when we are brought together we are one family and God has called us to that family. The thing for us now is to go out and to share that love of family with the world, to grow the family of God as Jesus Christ desires it, as the Father desires it, as the Spirit wills it for us. To go out and to share that gospel and to say, "Come. I want you to come to my family. I want you to come and experience the love of a Father who knows my name, not only knows my name but gave me my very identity." No longer will I be part of that 73%; no longer will I be part of that world that is dominated by dysfunction. From now on as a new child of God, I'm going to claim the promises of God in my life because God has claimed them for me, so go out and be the family of God.

Amen.