

## That's Quite a Grip God's Got!

[Text -Romans 8:13-25]

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In his letter to the Christian community at Rome, Saint Paul writes, "All who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. For you did not receive a spirit of bondage, to fall back into fear; you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba!' 'Papa!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we truly are children of God!"

In the Christian community, Holy Baptism is the unshakable sign of our family connection with God, *and* with one another. One of the great things about the baptism of a child here, is that it's truly a *community* event. Along with that child's own family, each individual baptized also connects to a much larger family: the Brecksville United Church of Christ, and the worldwide Body of Christ. Within this extended and extensive family, each child is nurtured and supported as she or he develops and matures. You and I have the wonderful opportunity to watch that child grow in faith, and grow-up before our very eyes! And there's a lot that we adults can learn from these children as they grow among us.

Jesus says that in order to enter and fully participate in the Divine Realm, a person must have a child-like spirit of openness and acceptance, wonder and welcome. That's because the genuinely *inclusive* Divine Realm simply cannot include our adult-acquired tastes for narrow-minded prejudices or harsh-hearted judgements. Fortunately, this Church community is an excellent venue for letting go of those negative characteristics, and for practicing the Christ-like qualities of compassion and grace, openness and inclusion. Here at Brecksville United Church of Christ, we understand that Jesus never turns away anyone because they aren't pious or pure enough. In fact, it seems that

Jesus only really gets ticked-off at those who think that their own piety or purity puts them above other people! The Good News that Jesus proclaims, is that God's Gracious Spirit can change person's fearful judgmental spirit into a spirit of joyful openness; turn their darkness into light; their despair into hope; ultimately transforming the way of Death, into newness of Life. This is the Good News that every person - young or old - needs and longs to hear: that they truly are a loved and treasured child of God - and that they are always welcome within God's Family of Faith.

My own official welcome into the Family of Faith took place on Palm Sunday, 1953, with my baptism at Zion Lutheran Church in Canton Ohio. Like so many of my life's blessings, my introduction into the Church was a precious gift, bestowed upon me by my parents, my extended Family of Faith, and my Heavenly Parent - the Divine Giver of *all* good gifts. Being a member of a congregation, where I could learn about God and Jesus, and experience Divine Love and Grace through the lives of others, was truly an important stage in my development. I'm one of those people who basically "grew up" in the Church. From Sunday School, to Confirmation Classes, Youth Ministry, Church Camp Counselor and Program Director, through College and Seminary, all the way to Ordained Ministry - my life has been intertwined with, and blessed by, an inseparable connection to God's Family of Faith.

Even when I came out as being gay, and was no longer permitted to practice ministry in the Lutheran Church, I was still blessed to become part of a wonderfully caring community of people in the Human Services field. Through my work of helping provide support and assistance to people with developmental disabilities, I myself found tremendous support and acceptance. At a time when my entire life was in turmoil, I was thrown a lifeline of hope and affirmation that truly was *Divine!* What was perhaps most

remarkable, was that these good and compassionate people recognized and reaffirmed my God-given gifts for ministry.

Many of the people who received our services, as well as many of my coworkers and I, didn't exactly "fit in" with most religious organizations. Yet we all had our spiritual struggles and needs, questions and longings. Because I had been an ordained minister, I soon became a kind of unofficial "chaplain" to the people with whom I worked. I could still perform weddings and funerals, which I did for them. People felt comfortable talking with me about their problems and relationships, their faith and their fears, their hopes and dreams. And over time, this broken and battered ex-minister actually received from them, the deep healing that I needed in order to find peace and direction for my life's peculiar, meandering journey. Those wonderful people helped me realize that God's gifts and calling in my life were absolutely irrevocable! They also pointed to something that my heart already suspected: that somewhere out there, there had to be communities of *faith* that were equally compassionate and caring, open and affirming.

Imagine my amazement and joy, when circumstances [far too complex to share today] eventually led me back into ordained ministry - to a Denomination, and now a congregation, that truly understands what it means to be open and affirming, gracious and compassionate. In a way, it's like I finally found my way back home. Apparently, that Godly Grip that grabbed hold of me at my Baptism wasn't about to let go - no matter what I or others might do. As Saint Paul says, "You did not receive a spirit of bondage, to fall back into fear; you have received a spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba!' 'Papa!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we *are* children of God!"

Today, the Holy Spirit has reached out to Claire Esser in a remarkable and powerful way: through the love of her family, her Church Family, and her new adopted big brother, Jesus Christ. Regardless of where her life journey takes her, Claire - like each of us - will never be lost or alone. The continuing support of this community, and the unbreakable Holy Hug of our loving Heavenly Parent, absolutely guarantees it!