

Adopted by Grace
The Seventh Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, July 19, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

“You have received a spirit of adoption.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Every year, Ruthie and I send out three Mother's Day cards. One to my mama, one to her mama, and one to Mama Chris. Christine Johnson, or Mama Chris as we call her, is an adopted mother to us, and we consider her family as she does us. She took us under her wing during our time in Santa Fe. She nurtured me as a fledgling Episcopalian. In my first time to serve as crucifer, Mama Chris, who never lost her military bearing, said, “Paul, now lift that cross up high like you really mean it.” She gave me a traveling stole for ordination that I treasure and wear all the time for hospital and nursing home visits. She flew across the country for Ruthie's law school graduation. And some of you may have met her last August when she came to visit us, and timed her trip in order to hear her sorority sister, Bishop Phoebe, preach on Founder's Day.

Our unlikely relationship with a retired African-American nurse has become an integral part of who we are as a family. We're not quite sure who adopted who first, but we're glad we have all adopted one another.

In our epistle lesson from Romans, the apostle Paul describes God's relationship with us as a spirit of adoption. But before he gets there, he writes about two kinds of debt. The first is a debt to the flesh. It comes from seeing life, and even relationships, as transactional, leading to constant indebtedness for more. We can see others in terms of: “what can they do for me?” Paul argues that this outlook, this indebtedness to the flesh, leads to emptiness and a spiritual death, if not a physical one.

But he also writes about a debt to the Spirit. Spirit debt is not what must be repaid, it's paid to us. It gives life, instead of taking it away. Spirit debt moves us out of the prison of transactional thinking, and into the realms of grace, gift, and gratitude.

Two of the most important words I've learned to say are: “You're welcome.” When someone thanks me for something, often my first impulse is to come back with a greater thank you for something they did for me recently or in the past. I even want to make your and my gratitude transactional. But the words, “you're welcome” have the power to break that unhealthy chain. Those words say, “I freely accept your gratitude. I'm not going to rob you of the pleasure of your freely giving it. Instead, I'm going to savor it for the beautiful gift it is.”

God gives us the grace of new life and new hope, not as a doctrine, but as the deeper and more profound gift of an ongoing relationship. God chooses us to be family. We are adopted.

What was it that made Mama Chris choose me and Ruthie, and we choose her, for this adoptive relationship? Like us, she grew up Baptist. In fact, she was the daughter of a Baptist preacher in

racially segregated North Carolina. Those days shaped her to keep an eye out for those like herself, those who may feel like outsiders or even feel forgotten. Like Congressman John Lewis and The Reverend C.T. Vivian, whom we remember this weekend, Christine Johnson marched with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. She was on the front lines of the civil rights movement.

Mama Chris put her passion for justice to work by becoming a Commissioned Officer nurse in the U.S. Public Health Service under the Surgeon General. She accepted an assignment in Santa Fe to lead medical teams in serving indigenous peoples. And she's stayed there for 38 years!

I have never met a person with so much energy. Mama Chris taught nursing at Santa Fe Community College. She visited and worked with prisoners in the Kairos ministry. She helped with the Dreamer Project to assist immigrants seeking citizenship.

When she greeted us at St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Santa Fe, she welcomed and embraced us with open arms. She learned our story and discovered we were both a long way from home, with no built-in family or friends anywhere near there. Very quickly, she became that family for us. And we became that for her, too. The beautiful thing about our relationship is that it does not feel at all transactional. It feels natural. It's based on mutual sharing, mutual encouragement, and mutual love. Our relationship feels like a gift. It feels like grace.

Through our adoption as God's children - God's heirs, grace is no longer a simple formula for our salvation. Instead, grace opens up an entire tapestry of a rich, often messy, ongoing journey in relationship marked by growth, learning, forgiveness, service, and love.

Mama Chris can't move quite as quick as when we first met her. But her mind is still sharp as a tack and she is as opinionated and sassy as ever. On her visit here last year, she made a point of getting to know restaurant servers by their first names and wanted to learn their stories. When we got up from the table, she offered each one of them a word of encouragement and a word of hope.

One of the most poignant parts of her visit was when Tim Huebner graciously guided Mama Chris and me on a tour of the National Civil Rights Museum. Mama Chris noticed a photograph of people in Laurel, Mississippi. I commented about how much I enjoyed day trips to Laurel to visit the Lauren Rogers Arts Museum in a stately old home. Mama Chris looked at me and said, "Paul, I know about that home. My grandmother was maid to Mrs. Rogers." Like any good mother, she's still teaching me, still challenging me to see that there's another side of the story.

A few years ago, Mama Chris was the subject of a tribute in Santa Fe Magazine. The article closed by describing her this way: "When it is time to celebrate, it is done with gusto; when it is time to mourn, it is done with dignity; when it is time to just be, it is time to just be. Christine shares all of this in the deepest and most touching way possible. She makes sure people have someone in their life when it is most needed. No judgements or mandates, just pure love that embraces you and keeps you where you need to be in any given moment or in any given situation."

That's the pure love we've been blessed to experience up close as her adopted son and daughter. That's also the pure love all of us experience as adopted children and heirs of God. Mama Chris sums up her own way of being this way, "Whatever I do, it's because it's important for struggling people to know that other people care about them, and that God loves them."

She knows firsthand how much we all need that love. As we feel embraced and adopted by God, the apostle Paul says we cry out, “Abba, Father!” Abba has often been translated as something more intimate than Father, something more like “Daddy.”

Much like Christine Johnson became Mama Chris to us, the greatest joys in life are to feel and share the intimate grace, embrace, and love of God. Thanks, Mama Chris. *Amen.*