

Rev. Stephan Papa
June 1, 2014

SERMON: "The Scarlet Letter "A": A Celebration of Adoption"

The theme for our services this month is families. As we consider them, let's break the narrow minded mold for what families are that society has passed on to us. Let's honor the diverse kinds of families that exist, and this Sunday especially those who increased the size of their families through adoption. I think adoption is one of the most wonderful things a person can do. Adoption is an act of love; something to celebrate and cultivate, and yet there are only around 136,000 adoptions a year in the United States. There are several reasons for this low number; one is most certainly the historically negative influence of an arrogant, disapproving society, which has stigmatized people involved in adoption.

In Oscar Wilde's play, *The Importance of Being Ernest*, when the main character who was adopted, or "found" as he puts it, says, "I have lost both my parents." The very proper Lady Bracknell responds, "To lose one parent ... may be regarded as a misfortune; to lose both looks like carelessness." She goes on to advise him that he "try to acquire some relations as soon as possible and to make a definite effort to produce at any rate one parent, of either sex, before the [social] season is quite over."

An orphan is made to feel "careless," that they were cared for less than others; a mother who offers her child for adoption is said to be "careless," that she is "giving up" caring for the child. Carelessness may be an individual problem, but society's callousness only creates more problems for all the people involved in what is usually predominantly an act of love. I agree with Lady Bracknell on one thing: we all would do well to acquire more relations; we need to acknowledge our connections, stop denigrating women, maligning their progeny, and start affirming loving families of all kinds and colors.

For centuries traditional religion has put social pressure on women not to have children out of wedlock; if they did, the Puritans, for example, branded them with the scarlet letter "A" as an adulterer and cast them out of society to die. This unchristian response was cruelly extended from the "sins of the father" and mother, and visited on the offspring, especially if they were "given up" for adoption, as this was seen as the parents trying to get out from responsibility for their "sin." Even adopting mothers and fathers were stigmatized by society; they were rumored to be less capable than those who reproduce; words such as barren were projected on to the woman, and the man was considered not virile. The judgmental moralizing of an "A" for the sin of adultery is carried on today and applied to those who choose an abortion and to those who are part of an adoption plan. Even today a mother offering a child for adoption may feel guilty, and the child given up, whether adopted or not, may feel that they were not wanted, that they were someone else's second choice.

Church and state should not punish people for reproductive mistakes nor force everyone into one mold of family structure. In society's stereotyping, some children offered for adoption, like one born outside of marriage get stained with the label "bastard," which hurts. I know, and hate that word, because my grandfather was one. I will never forget the first time I saw his birth certificate, nor the embarrassment I felt when a priest translated it for me. His birth certificate had written "illegitimate" in the line where the name of his father should have been. He left Poland and came to this country because no one would adopt him; he had a mother, but the life of a fatherless

child in Poland in the 1890's was grim. He came here and lived a good though poor life; and I am proud of him, especially for his courage in coming alone to a new country, but I still feel some of the fear and shame he felt.

Our parents and grandparents influence us; so does society by the imposition of its terms and categories. During my first marriage I adopted my then wife's "illegitimate" child, Jennifer, and I loved her "like my own" as they say. We live together but a few years; her mother would not allow me to tell her she had another father. Years later she finally found out through another relative. Following the difficulties of the divorce, years of little contact, a new marriage and child, I found myself usually just answering the question "How many children do you have?" by saying, "one," and speaking of Jennifer as my "adopted" daughter only when time and circumstances warranted a complete answer. I did not love her any the less because she was not of my "flesh and blood," but the divorce, geography, and demographic differences made for distance in the relationship; I have not been a very involved parent, but she still calls me dad, and I call her daughter, and I still affirm adoption.

In my experience as an adult "chosen family" has become more important to me than "birth family"; I chose Patty; we chose Alexandra; friends, congregation members, you have all been chosen, and know me better than my Polish, Catholic, rural relatives. Family to me is more about love, honesty, and commitment than having the same genetic makeup. I chose to adopt Jennifer, but I am also aware that making a distinction between adopted and birth relationships, which may be honest, also brings up the vestiges of the religious negative valuations, which stay with us all to some degree. Let us be sensitive to the words we use, the judgmental attitudes, and the realities of adoption.

Betty Jean Lifton's in her book *Lost & Found* points out that the adoption process has been clouded in secrecy, slander, and stereotypes. For example, women years ago would wear maternity pillows to appear pregnant before they adopted; the stigma of not being a "birth" mother was so great. The term "give up" for adoption derived from the fact that trainloads of supposedly orphaned underclass immigrant children were taken from the cities of the east by train to the stations of the west to be claimed as chattel, child laborers; they were lifted up onto the platform for inspection. Lifton notes the Willows agency of Kansas City professed in 1923 in a newspaper ad "to deal in 'Superior Babies' from 'clean American stock.'" We can see the racism mixed in with the moralism and elitism to force people into a "cookie cutter mold" if they could fit, otherwise if they did not, to limit their economic opportunities and even their opportunities for love.

My grandfather may not have been ""superior" but he was valuable to me. Our society has not been set up with equal opportunity; we have been unfair, unkind, and hidden the fact in mythology. A woman I once knew who ran an adoption agency says that there are "Four myths of Adoption: One that the birthmother obviously doesn't care about, her child or she wouldn't have given him away. Two, that secrecy in every phase of the adoption process is necessary to protect all parties. Three, both the birthmother and birthfather will forget about their unwanted child. And four, if the adoptee really loved his adoptive family, he would not have to search for his birthparents."

These are all false: wanting to know your background is natural; the child entrusted to someone else's care will never be forgotten; secrecy hurts especially the

child; the "birthmother" is sharing the child with someone else most usually because she loves it and wants more for the child than she can offer at the time.

There are many reasons individuals place children for adoption; most of which we will never know; so we shouldn't judge. I found an intriguing poem titled Icons of Their Time: "What if we had / known as children / that Lucy and Einstein / had given up children? / She who was / on every week, / he whose name / meant genius. / Would we have / laughed less at Lucy / or sat up more / in math class? / Or just seen / that sometimes / real people / smart funny okay / but real with / real circumstances / don't find a way / to stay with their children?"

There is a lot of mythology that blinds us to the individuality and the love of the people involved. Some people who have been adopted feel unwanted, repressing feelings like curiosity, fear, and anger, others don't. Some adopted children want to know their birth parents, others don't; some wish they didn't; they, we, are all individuals, different. We need to stop putting people into imaginary molds.

So that we might become more knowledgeable and affirming of the reality let me share with you some facts about adoption. As mentioned there are about 136,000 adoptions a year in the US. Half are by family members through kinship or marriage; in 2009, 12,753 were adopted from foreign countries; 2.5 percent of all children under 18 are adopted. 2-4 percent of all families have adopted. Approximately 7 million Americans alive today are adoptees. However, in 2002 in the US only about 1% of infants born were offered for adoption. Today there are 400,540 children without permanent families or in foster care of which 115,000 are eligible for adoption.

The American Adoptions website dispels some of the myths surrounding adoption. They write that "Any fears of the adoptive family not loving a child simply because it doesn't have their genes are immediately eliminated as soon as the adoptive parents first lay eyes on their baby.... Nearly 3 out of every 4 adopted children ages 0-5 are read to or sang to every day, compared with only half of non-adopted children who receive the same attention from their biological parents..... Over half of all adopted children eat dinner with their families at least six days per week.... 9 out of every 10 [adoptive parents] said they would "definitely" make the same decision to adopt again. These statistics are remarkable considering all of the special needs babies that are adopted and the other complexities that may occur through adoption..... 99 percent of adopted children ages 5 and older know that they were adopted. Over 90 percent of adopted children ages 5 and older have positive feelings about their adoption....."

A parent who offers up their child for adoption cares, and so should all of us. We need to get beyond stereotypes; they are limiting, unfair, and unkind. Old time religion helped create them; the religion we need for the future needs to help people expand them. That is what each and every adoption does; in love it transcends society's traditional limits to create a more inclusive family; and in doing so creates a more inclusive world.

I know many stories of adoption such as Peter and Kate's, and yes, they include challenges, as do all parenting and childhood stories, and imperfect people, but all the stories I know are love stories. Call out the names of people you know who are involved in adoption in some way having given a child, adopting, or been adopted.... Let us honor them.

My grandfather was not "illegitimate"; he had a right to be here. No child is "illegitimate"! Every child has a right as well as a need to be cared for, for love. Society

needs to do more than ostracize; we need to do more for the children of the world. Mistakes happen; selfishness is real; an uncaring society is irresponsible. One could say that if there has been any “carelessness” involved, it has been from narrowness of purpose on our part as individuals and as a society. So, expand your notion of family. Affirm all families: birth families, single parent families, lesbian, gay, international, blended, chosen families. Adopt a more gracious attitude toward others outside of your immediate family too; after all, we are all part of one human family, let’s celebrate and honor it. Amen.