

Womb-love: The practice and theology of adoption

by [Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner](#) in the [January 24, 2001](#) issue

Father Ron meant well. He would never have intentionally excluded some children from his sermon. It was Wednesday mass, and the congregation was primarily children—kindergartners through eighth-graders—with a sprinkling of teachers, administrators and parents. The text was Colossians 1:15: Christ is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.”

Father Ron developed his theme: Children look like their parents; Jesus as God’s Son reveals what God is like. He gave examples, picking out children: “You look just like your mother. You have her eyes, her nose, her dimple.” Or: “You are an athlete just like your Uncle Sam. You have his genes.” The point was profoundly simple: We know what God is like by looking at Jesus.

The comparison was not lost on the two third-grade girls seated directly in front of me. Both were dark-skinned, one from India and one from Southeast Asia. Both had Caucasian parents. The more passionately Father Ron spoke, the more pointedly one of the adopted girls shook her head in rhythm with his preaching.

Two-thirds of the way through his sermon, Father Ron realized his miscalculation. Perhaps he remembered that the school had a number of adopted children. He then acknowledged that there were those in the church who were adopted into families, and he asked them to raise their hands. Now the children were confronted with a choice: either hide their identity from the Catholic priest, or reveal an aspect of themselves that some children consider personal or private. Hands went up at half-mast.

Having witnessed this scene, I can well believe German sociologist Christine Swientek’s account of another well-intentioned pastor’s ineptness. At confirmation class, this pastor spoke about being “children of God” and looked for an example to illustrate this special relationship between father and children. He focused on a boy named Hannes, and said in front of 35 snickering and giggling adolescents: “You

should try to imagine what it is like to be Hannes at home—his parents are not his birth parents. Hannes’s parents are his adoptive parents who took him and raised him. They do not love him any less.”

Hannes was dumbfounded. He did not have the slightest idea that he was adopted. He stood up, went outside, and then ran away. He was first found three months later in juvenile detention for stealing food from a supermarket.

These stories indicate how the church has failed to be sensitive to the reality of adoption and failed to recognize adoption is a paradigm for the church—a “family of faith” made up of people who are not biologically related. (H. David Kirk in *Adoptive Kinship* has gone further to suggest that the adoptive family could be “the compass” for the mainstream family.)

When Father Ron thought of “family,” he thought only of the biological family—unwittingly relegating other kinds of families to a second-class status. The church has often followed society in idealizing and even idolizing the genetically linked family. The scriptures themselves bear evidence of a male preoccupation with his blood lineage.

There is another image of inclusion in the Bible: the image of adoption. The invitation and inclusion of gentiles into the family of God occurs by adoption through Christ, the firstborn. Yet many communities of faith exhibit an unconscious aversion and defensive reaction to the notion of adoption. Adoption is unconsciously seen as an aberration from the norm of the biological family.

Adoption is sometimes considered a joke. Kenneth Kaye remembers that he and his cousins “would tease the younger ones by pretending to let slip the fact they were adopted. In reality, no one was; it was simply a way of saying, ‘You’re different; you’ll never fit in.’ We inherited the joke from our mothers, who have been recycling it on their baby sister for nearly 60 years.”

One adopted boy reported being taunted at school that he didn’t know who his father [that is, his birth father] was. Another adopted child felt treated differently by her teacher; the teacher made comments like: “You think because you’ve gone through one experience in your life [the adoption], you’ve paid all your dues.”

An adoptive mother reported this incident in a grocery store: another shopper came up to her and her adopted son, who was two or three, and said, “He’s not your child.

He must be adopted.”

Because of such insensitivity, Christian parents often hide from their children the fact that their children are adopted. They dread the moment of telling. They know that peers of adopted children may taunt them or pity them. Adopted children can feel that their existence is a “mistake.” (For example, referring to a birth mother, one parishioner remarked: “She really is a good girl. She just made a mistake.”) Voices lower with the words, “She’s adopted.”

In both subtle and dramatic ways, North American culture has often positioned adopted children on the margins of society. The church has followed uncritically.

Adoption in the New Testament is the central biblical image for entrance into the family of faith. The crucial passages are Galatians 4:5; Romans 8:15, 23; 9:4; and Ephesians 1:5. (At least three Old Testament texts—Genesis 48:5-6, Exodus 2:10 and Esther 2:7,15—also make adoption a central activity.) From a New Testament perspective, adoption is the paradigm for all who come into the family of Christ through God’s adoption. This perspective has ramifications for the counseling ministry of the church, for sermons and Christian education and for the life of Christians in communities of faith.

Adoption is a complex phenomenon, especially when the theological dimension is added. Adoption involves the deep-seated dimensions of grief, guilt and gift.

Many social workers, therapists and writers emphasize the elements of grief and guilt common to birth parents, adoptees and adoptive parents. Most recently, Nancy Verrier in *The Primal Wound* and Ronald J. Nydam in *Adoptees Come of Age* have argued that an adopted child never fully recovers from the fact that he or she was relinquished by birth parent(s). But these writers have not given equal weight to the reality of “gift.” From a theological standpoint, it is the pervasive sense of gift which permeates both grief and guilt and opens the triad of grief, guilt, gift to a glimpse of the womb-love of God.

What is parenting? What is the ultimate significance of the nuclear or biological family, the family of origin? What is the role of the family of faith? These questions are stimulating ones for Christian education classes and for sermons.

Polly and her husband, Bob, live out one answer to these questions. Polly, 28, is a Presbyterian minister; Bob, 29, is in business. While Polly was in seminary, she and

her husband were watching a Wendy's commercial in which the founder, Dave Thomas, mentioned his adoption. Bob asked Polly if she was interested in adopting. "We knew God had laid it on our hearts very early on. . . . We had that calling upon our hearts, we never felt a need to have biological children," Polly said.

First, Polly and Bob served as foster parents through the Department of Human Services in their state. Then, they chose to seek out "unadoptable children"—children with special needs, older children or sibling groups. "We felt God was leading us to more permanent commitments with children . . . You know, there are over a 100 children per day waiting in [our] state to be adopted."

At the time of the interview, Polly and Bob had three adopted daughters, ages 20, 14 and 15. They had two "pre-adopted" children, ages four and ten, already in their home, waiting for the six months to pass before legal adoption could occur. Polly concluded: "Without God's help there's not a day when we could be parents of the children God has blessed us with. . . . Every decision we make around children, we hold up to God."

Another story: Sam's wife, Peggy, tried for years to become pregnant. After infertility workups which Sam called "agonizing" and "humiliating," they decided to adopt a child from another country.

Sam and Peggy stayed in Peru for ten weeks, a period they describe as emotionally chaotic. Their story involves delay after delay, complications with exit visas and birth certificates, additional expenses, closed doors. Pushing past Peruvian guards to knock on closed embassy offices, Sam recalled the story in the New Testament of a persistent woman going before a judge. He pleaded and begged. During the waiting in Peru, Sam experienced in a profound way a reality he had often preached about: reliance on the sovereignty of God.

When Sam and Peggy at last had an adopted son, the moment of the child's baptism arrived. As part of the service, the parents were asked to affirm that the child was not theirs but God's. After all that he had been through, Sam wanted to shout: "This kid is mine." At the same time, said Sam, "It was the most freeing experience I've ever had to realize there's a God that doesn't desire for this little kid's hairs to be harmed, whose arms are so much sturdier than [my] shaky arms." Adoptive parents have a keen awareness that children belong to God, not to their parents.

Sam later preached a sermon titled “Is There Life After Barrenness?” He concluded: “I have come to think . . . that it is from the barren places of our lives that we hear God most clearly.”

A “homecoming” through adoption of a longed-for child is parabolic of God’s welcome. It is a glimpse of God’s embrace, of God’s hospitality, of God’s trembling womb (Is. 63:15-16).

Womb-love (*raham*) is synonymous in the Old Testament with the mercy and compassion of God, according to scholar Phyllis Trible. Womb-love as expressed by God is not biologically based. Womb-love, that yearning from the very center of being, describes the tenacious compassion in God’s desire and mercy. That yearning is there in Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she searches for her lost 12-year-old, and it is there when her heart is pierced at the foot of the cross. It is there with the widow of Nain pleading for her child. It is there as King David weeps for his son Absalom.

To adopt a child is to experience some of the vulnerability and woundedness of God. Bryn Kreidel, an adoptive mother in Memphis, wrote this prayer before receiving a baby. She expresses a womb-love that reflects the womb-love of God.

Then I remember that you [God] wait and wonder . . . Longing for your adopted children to be in your arms . . . Gazing into your eyes, hearing your love songs . . .

Suddenly, I know how you feel, God . . . That constriction of the heart that causes pain to the depths of the soul. And I know that my pain is more godly than anything in my life has ever been. For once, my heart is like your heart.

And this holy pain leads me to my knees . . . To thank you for the wait . . .
And to pray for all the babies that need to come home . . . Yours and mine.

When Christians move adoption from the periphery to the center of theological reflection, teaching and counseling, they will lessen the degree to which adopted children are assigned a second-class status in secular society. The ministry of the church will become more inclusive as adoptive families are understood and fully incorporated and as the worshiping community realizes its own adoption. For the

family of faith, adoption is the norm, not an aberration.

When adoptive parents recount their emotions, their struggles, their worries and their faith, the clear theme emerges of receiving a child as a gift from God. Whereas the biological connection identifies birth parents as the agents of creating, or those sowing the seed, the adoptive connection is dependent on external agency. There is a higher source than flesh and natural conception.

Walter Wangerin Jr. tells of the summer that his daughter Talitha asked to find her birth parents. She had just finished her freshman year at college and was beginning a search for identity. Wangerin writes of his sense of invisibility in the process, until he started to identify himself with Joseph, the adoptive father of Jesus.

Training up the child of one's own loins has a deep spiritual and genetic appropriateness. One doesn't question one's right and the instinctive rightness of one's methods. Communication is as deep as the chromosomes. [My wife] Thanne and I have raised children born to us as well as children adopted, and we've experienced the difference. In order to train up the adopted child, one must also learn *her* language, since communication begins at the surface of things. One must never assume a complete knowledge of this child except as watchfulness and love reveal her. And very early the adoptive parent realizes that the methods of training *this* child must obey a greater source than flesh and natural conception. (*Christianity Today*, December 11, 1995).

Statistics show that adopted children face special challenges. Many deal with concern over abandonment, and they face crises over identity and intimacy. Adopted children have an above-average rate of seeking therapy. Four to 5 percent of adopted children are referred to outpatient mental health facilities. Ten to 15 percent are referred to residential care facilities. Adopted children have higher rates of delinquent behavior, learning disorders, and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder than their nonadopted peers. Drug abuse is prevalent. (See *The Psychology of Adoption*, Oxford University Press.)

Adoptive parents usually know these realities. Thus, for adopting parents, the joy of receiving a child into the home is a preamble to facing the crises of child development. These challenges, along with the stigma attached to adoptive parenting, are all occasions to look more deeply into the heart of God, the One who

embraces our pain as well as our joy. God's tenacious compassion, God's womb-love, in the face of human waywardness and suffering, offers a theological foundation from which to draw in the crises of adoption.

In the Nativity scene, the adoptive father Joseph and the biological mother Mary represent all humankind. God is at work as creator and as adopting parent. And, of course, God is the child, who will later be abandoned on the cross. The emotions and experiences of birth mother, adoptive parent, and child are all embraced by God.

An adoptive mother named Linda discovered this embrace of God as she struggled to care for her son. He had been diagnosed with attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder. He was so impetuous in his actions that his mother feared for his safety. After he turned ten he became defiant toward anyone in authority. Eventually he was hospitalized. When the hospital staff said they couldn't handle him, Linda and her husband offered to help out.

I learned how to monitor his behavior hourly. I took him his food on a tray and slid it across the threshold of his solitary-confinement room. I did the same with his schoolwork. It was on one of those occasions, when I was crawling on the rug to slide over his lunch, while crouched on the floor, that I glimpsed the heart of God. I say "glimpsed" because I do not mean to be presumptuous or imply full knowledge. I was swept up by a godly passion that enveloped me, too. In the early months of adoption when our son was an infant, I thought I knew what the love of a parent was. In the giddy joy of receiving a baby, in the flood of well-wishers bearing precious gifts, I thought I knew love. However, crawling on the floor of the child psychiatric unit toward my son in confinement, I was carried into the womb of God, into womb-love, God's compassion, a love that will not let me go, nor my son. In God's womb-love, I, too, am adopted.