

Adopted and loved

One of the greatest mysteries of faith is that God loves us as is.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [January 29, 2020](#) issue



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Martha had an undeniably difficult childhood. “Mom regularly beat me with a strap. She was mean even when I did nothing wrong,” she told me. “My dad was cruel for reasons I don’t understand. He’d pack my lunch for school and often put a rock in it instead of a sandwich. As hungry as I was after school, I dreaded coming home.”

What’s amazing about this cruelty is that Martha’s parents had adopted her, a decision normally undertaken by adults who have a deep and caring desire to secure a child’s future. Something backfired in Martha’s case, and it may be due to the

circumstances under which she was adopted.

Born in 1923, Martha was one of the last children to ride an orphan train, a transportation system that brought parentless children from eastern cities to prospective families in western and midwestern towns. Between 1854 and 1929, children's aid organizations in cities like New York and Philadelphia placed an estimated 200,000 orphaned children aboard trains for adoption by families in other states. Many beautiful families were formed despite weak or nonexistent processes for identifying qualified parents. At times, an auction-like atmosphere filled train depots as crowds of rural townsfolk gathered to gawk at the children or choose a child on the spot. Not until government legislation established early child welfare laws did the orphan trains cease to run.

When I asked Martha how it was that she and her husband managed to raise a beautiful child of their own after the hellish childhood she had endured, she said, "I was determined to do the complete opposite of what my parents did for me."

That's a lot of grace and fortitude displayed, but not entirely surprising from a woman who rests her life on the conviction of Ephesians 2:8. Karl Barth's rendering of that verse—"For by grace you have been saved through the faithfulness of God, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God"—underscores God's beneficence toward us. That God would want us or love us just as we are, and not as God might wish we were, is astonishing. It's unconditional love akin to what the best adoptive parents embody.

I meet such parents regularly. One couple I know adopted five-year-old Marzell into their United Nations-look-alike family a year ago. Their happy adoption announcement remains taped to my bookshelf. Marzell smiles while holding a poster above his head: "I am chosen. I am wanted. I am loved. I am adopted."

When a friend of mine bought an inexpensive used car a couple years ago, we chuckled over the AS IS sticker he left on the window for a few days. His translation of those two words—"This may be a lemon, so consider yourself paying for surprise"—wasn't far off my own interpretation of their meaning: "You may be a sucker, but what are your options?"

If I want to contemplate one of the biggest mysteries of faith, all I have to do is imagine an AS IS sticker on my back and the Lord willing and desirously loving me in my condition. Biblical faith insists that God doesn't love us because we're worthy;

we have worth and value because God loves us. The ordering is critically important. It's an ordering that faithful adoptive parents never lose sight of.

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