



12/27-28/25 -- First Sunday after Christmas

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Hug Your Heavenly Father

1. He embraced you first 2. He won't let go

⁴But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.^[b] ⁶Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, "Abba,^[c] Father." ⁷So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. (Galatians 4: 4-7).

In the name of the Triune God, dear children of the Heavenly Father,

Little kids are a lot of fun ... especially around the holidays. They're always ready to play card games, board games, really any games. They fill our homes with the sounds of laughter and the pitter patter of little feet. And what's REALLY fun is how these little ones display their affection – they'll drop whatever they are doing just to give mom or dad a BIG hug.

But, somewhere around the 5th grade, those hugs seem to come LESS often. Our fuzzy little ducklings can morph into prickly porcupines. Anyone here notice that before? Actual conversation is replaced by grunts, eye-rolls, and other fun forms of body language. And we wonder: who is to blame? Is it their music, their friends, or some form of screen time. Excuse me while I napchat ... Of course, it couldn't be our own fault or example, could it? Naah. Sooner than later, kids begin to understand that their parents don't have all the answers for everything and that they make mistakes too. My own mom calls it: "rugged independence that God builds into them" because, as she says, you wouldn't want them still living in your basement until they are 55, would you?" I regularly say to my mom: "would that be so bad?" I've read that about the age of 35, children began to appreciate their parents again ... so hang on.

For many, sadly, it works that way with religion. I mean, as little kids, it's a whole lot easier to believe in God. As a rule, little kids don't question God – they just accept God's way of running the world. Little ones sing as loud as they can in church and get so excited to put money in the offering plates – just watch them – they are excellent Christian examples for us. So then, what goes wrong? It's really not about the style of music or the perception that church is just for "old folks", is it? It's Satan ancient lie that we don't need anyone looking over our shoulder, that we don't need basic accountability, that we can get through life just fine without God's guidance or help.

But, that's all it is. A lie. Jesus, Himself said: ***Truly, I tell you, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 18:3)***. Jesus didn't mean that we should become child-ISH, but child-LIKE – simply trusting His Word in the Bible, and self-lessly following the Savior. For all those times we've been child-ISH, self-centered and self-absorbed, our Heavenly Father has not given up on us. Despite our prickly nature, His love for us has not grown cold. On this first weekend of Christmas, each one of us here needs this important reminder from Galatians, chapter four to **Hug our Heavenly Father**. Of course, God is a spirit and you can't hug a spirit. I mean we need to renew our commitment to love Him and His Word. Connect with Him closer because He has embraced us first. And secondly, He won't let go.

Let's start with this principal: all parents love their children – they just have different ways of showing it. Some of us come from homes with lots of hugging. Others of us had parents who were more reserved, perhaps even distant. So how does God show His affection for us? The surprising fact of Scripture is that He has embraced us as His dear children.

Our sermon reading today is from Paul's letter to the Galatians in chapter four. The book of Galatians is all about who we are as God's children. In the early days of the Christian church, many felt that the only true children of God were Jews (after all, they were the chosen people) and those Gentile converts to Judaism who were circumcised and obeyed the Old Testament laws. Paul, who was as strict of a Jew as you could get, totally disagreed with them. He went so far as to say: ***there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Galatians 3: 28-29)***.

So what about those OT laws? What were they good for? Think of your average day care, you know, the one with dozens of kids, sometimes loud and even screaming. Imagine them being left on their own, what would they do? Either they'd all try to run away, or destroy what was in front of them. Sound like a fun place to be? Instead, the only way to hold order is to crack down with strict rules. Ask any day care worker. Paul says that's what life was like in the days of the Old Testament. God laid a heavy thumb on the Jewish people, laying down many ceremonial laws to protect them.

Would you send your little bundle of joy into a day care like that, the one with the free-for-all mentality? You probably wouldn't but God did. God sent His one and only Son Jesus to become a flesh and blood baby on a rescue mission into our broken world that

was not kind. Paul put it this way in our sermon reading: ***“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.*** God exposed His Son Jesus to all the hardships and heartaches of our human existence. And He made His Son submit to the same rules and regulations as everyone else. Jesus had to obey His parents for every time we didn’t, to go to bed when they said so, and do chores when they said so without ever rolling His perfect eyes to serve in our place. Jesus had to be circumcised, to watch what He ate, and to observe all the Jewish feasts and festivals. How hard was that? It’s tough enough to spend a couple of nights under your parents roof over the holidays. You know they mean well, but. Keep in mind, Jesus even created Mary and Joseph and his family. He created the government and authorities who would later condemn Him. He even created the ceremonial rules and regulations and then had to submit to them.

Each of us here has been born under God’s Law too, just like Jesus. But, we handle things differently when there’s law, don’t we? We can move out of our parents’ home or hang up on them if they say things we don’t like to hear. But, none of us here can break free from God’s Law – His Law still applies to us and condemns us when we break it, even if we ignore it. And friendly reminder -- none of us here can live up to the perfect, holy expectations that our Heavenly Father demands from us. That’s why Jesus came, to redeem us, that is to buy us back from sin and death. Even though we are by nature totally unruly, undisciplined, and unlovable brats, only Jesus Christ has changed our status from sinner to saint, from damned to saved. He changed our status by His birth, His perfect life, death, and resurrection. And it’s all because of His love in Christ, God has embraced us first. And this all happened in our Baptism. When water was simply sprinkled on our skin, our sins were washed away, and we were welcomed into His family. Talk about a heavenly embrace!!! Remember your Baptism because when you do, you will remember what Christian family you belong to and will receive the power to listen closer to God.

More than 50% percent of people today report they have unresolved issues with their earthly fathers. Even in Star Wars films, Luke Skywalker and Kylo Ren couldn’t get away from their paternal problems, could they? But, how about us and our Heavenly Father? Do we ever blame God for anything? I mean, couldn’t He have made our lives a little easier and spared us from some of our troubles? Satan likes to double down on trouble, to separate us from the only one who can save us. Part of growing up means we need to stop blaming our parents for our own problems. And becoming God’s child means we now accept responsibility for our past mistakes, misteps, and sins.

But, God doesn't just want our respect. He wants our love. And sometimes it's hard to hug or love our Heavenly Father. We don't always see eye-to-eye with him. We always don't like His rules, His discipline, and at times wonder if He's really listening to our prayers. Like a teenager, we often think we know better than our perfect Father in heaven.

We need to remember: God's timing is perfect. God knew exactly when to send His Son Jesus into the world at just the right time to bring us into His family. Because of that, our relationship with God has changed forever. We are not under some kind of house arrest, looking for a chance to escape. Instead, Paul said it this way: ***'So you are no longer a slave, but God's child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.*** We don't live in fear that God is going to disinherit us. We are His children, and that means we will one day inherit heaven. Every family has a black sheep – a problem child, one who causes heartache for the family. If the truth be known, all of us act like black sheep of the family but God does not let go of us because of the perfect obedience of His Son Jesus. And because the Holy Spirit is in our hearts, we hug him back. We hold on to Him, that is we connect with Him through His Word and Sacrament.

God doesn't force us to obey Him, to go to church, to pray. Oh, the devil tries to make it seem that way. If we do anything out of guilt, fear, or habit, we are not acting like God's heirs, but rather like slaves. And what can a slave expect but a beating when he messes up. But, when we mess up, our reading reminds us to return to our Heavenly Father, because of Christ, God will never let us go. Can you think of anything more comforting than that? That's why we will never be too old to hug our heavenly Father. Amen.