

Paul's powerful metaphor

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Metaphor is essential to grasping the divine/human character of God. Nowhere is metaphor used more compellingly than by the apostle Paul, especially in his use of the word "adoption" as a metaphor for God's loving grace.

In more than 50 years of ministry, I have become persuaded that the most destructive human experience is the sense of being unacceptable to and forgotten by a parent. The harshest words I ever heard came when I met with a marginal member of the congregation I served, to plan her mother's funeral. "First of all," she announced, "I want the service to be as short as possible, and I don't want you to say anything nice about my mother."

I tried to mollify her anger: "Well, when people grow old, sometimes they..."

"No," she interrupted, "my mother was a bitch the day she was born, and she was a bitch when she died, and I do not want you to say anything nice about her."

I'm also persuaded that the most creative human experience is the sense of being totally cherished and accepted by a parent. In 15th-century Italy it was common for the desperately poor to abandon their newborns. So in 1419, the Foundling Hospital was built in Florence to be a haven for abandoned infants. Today the building houses pediatric clinics and children and family services, along with a marvelous museum that continues to attract many tourists.

Most of them come to see the Rota, a large lazy Susan kind of device built at the entrance to the hospital. In the 15th century, a mother who could no longer care for her baby could bring the child to the Foundling Hospital, place it on the Rota, ring a

small bell and turn the wheel that turned the Rota. The child would disappear through the opening into the hospital, where it would be received and cared for.

The museum also includes a collection of scraps of cloth, ribbons, buttons, medals and pins that mothers affixed to the blankets their babies were wrapped in, often preserving a similar artifact for future identification. There are military medals and tiny halves of brooches--awaiting the day the mother's fortunes improved and she could bring back the other half and reclaim her child.

"Is it conceivable," asks the prophet, "that a mother could have no compassion for the child of her womb?" Hardly so--and how much more steadfast is the love of God? It is the essence of the gospel, the theme of all scripture, the substance of every revelation, the summation of everything that Jesus came to do and say. The breadth and depth of God's love is unfathomable. But Paul's use of the familial metaphor of a parent's love for a child gives us an inkling.