

After adoption

Dhini didn't ask to be adopted. That's the way grace works.

Faith Matters

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She was three years old, had milk chocolate skin, jet-black hair and brown eyes the size of saucers. She didn't speak more than a few words of English. We call her Dhini. Her new father, who is our mission pastor, and his wife had just brought her home from India after spending well over a year struggling to arrange her adoption.

Dhini has had a number of issues. She was born with a large mole on her shoulder that could become cancerous if it's not removed; a series of complicated surgeries and skin grafts will take years to complete. Also, since she spent her first three years of life in an orphanage where she was left alone most of the day, her motor skills were not so good. And who knows the primal abandonment issues such a little girl may face?

But there is also the issue of having two parents who are head over heels in love with her. And the issue of a congregation that had been praying for her a year before we knew her name. Most of all there is the amazing issue of God's devotion to this precious little girl.

I got through most of the baptismal liturgy pretty well. But when I saw her in the arms of her father, arms around his neck, and I came to the words about being adopted into the family of God—I was done with words. No one offered to take over for me, so the congregation just worshiped a while with tears as our silent prayers of gratitude. Eventually, her new father poured the water of a holy covenant over the head of his new daughter. We were all a mess.

Why were we all so overwhelmed? Was it because our mission pastor had spent years teaching us how to take the pathos of the world into our hearts, or that I had spent years preaching about our adoption into the Triune family? Perhaps it's because we knew that we all have issues, and we pray that none of them are greater than the issue of holy love that flows over everything else.

Several years earlier the mission pastor's wife had given birth to a beautiful little blonde girl who was now about the same age as Dhini. But through adoption Dhini was being made the heir of her parents and the joint heir of her sister. No one in the congregation missed the metaphor. That is why we went to pieces when we saw her father gently scoop the water out of the baptismal font and allow it to flow down Dhini's face. It even dripped onto her wounded shoulder.

Dhini didn't ask to be adopted. She didn't earn or deserve it. She probably didn't know enough to want it. It just came as a grace that changed everything about her life. That's the way grace works—it is free, unmerited and unexpected, but then expects a lot from us. We don't make changes in our life to get adopted; we make them because we have been adopted.

This little girl has a lot of work ahead. She has to learn our language, traditions and mission, and she has to understand what it means to wear our family name of Christian. She has to suffer through the hard work of healing until the marks on her young life can be healed, and she has to figure out what it means to be an Indian raised by Anglo parents. Again, there are so many issues.

Every time we baptize a baby we are launching that child on this same journey through the issues of faith and life. We receive the grace of God, but we then spend the rest of our lives learning how to respond to it. This is why we have the church, which gives us the language of faith, teaches us its great traditions, inspires us with holy missions for our lives and constantly points us back to the gospel for our healing. We even have the opportunity to learn how to live with two identities that

belong to two kingdoms, this world and the world to come, both of which are created and cherished by God.

Dhini has by now had more surgeries on her shoulder than I can count. But she's never been daunted by any of them and seems to assume that getting healed is part of her life. Her language and motor skills are perfect for her age. She's one of the stars of our church's preschool.

My office looks out over the grassy courtyard that leads to the front door of the preschool. When I am having a tough day I hear the children squealing with delight and laughter and look out to see Dhini and her sister running with the other children across the grass.

For some reason Dhini always runs with her hands held straight over her head. Maybe that reason is praise. Maybe that's the real "issue" that we adopted children in the family of God need to keep working on.