

**Preacher:** Audrey Hollenberg-Duffey

**Scripture:** Romans 8:14-17

Research shows that over half of US drivers have names for their cars. Why do we do this? Well, naming a car creates a special bond between the driver and the car. Names give the car a personality, an identity. Interestingly enough, the name you give your car says something about you as a driver. It's not just a name for the car; it's a name for your relationship with the car strengthening the driver's sense of ownership and bond with the car.<sup>1</sup>

Names are important because they aren't just words. They have meaning. Attributing names to inanimate objects personifies them and they become reminiscent of other relationships.

I am a Hollenberg. This is the name I gained from my Father and one I bore proudly for the first 22 years of my life. I am also a Breidenstein, a Stauffer, a Frantz, a Groff, a Furman, a Rupert, a Sherwood, etc. etc. etc. When Tim and I were married, I gained a new name — Duffey... as well as names like Kight, Sensabaugh, Rathbun, and Harshman (yes, I bet you didn't know that our Administrative Assistant, Beverly, and Pastor Tim are distantly related). Even more than my last name can carry, I have a long line of names that are a part of my heritage, each shaping who I am today.

There is a whole market out there right now for people who want to explore their lineage. Whether it is ancestry.com, which allows you to find out who is on your family tree, or the DNA tests to find out what mash-up of countries are in your heritage, these different tests and programs give you a sense of identity — they shape how you see your past and possibly even your future.

There is something significant about being known, about belonging, about being connected. Knowing your heritage grounds you in a world where we continue to be more and more isolated. Being rooted in something is stabilizing and may even help you understand who you are.

Ever since Anita was born, people look at her and try to determine who she looks like — what physical features she got from Tim and what she got from me. Tim and I are less curious about those physical features, but we are definitely curious about her character. Who will she be like? What things will she learn from us, both good and bad? Will she gain her mother's need for adventure or her father's happy-go-lucky personality?

In the Church of the Brethren, we like to play the name game to see if we can trace to which individuals we are connected. This is fun if you've been connected to the Brethren for generations, but if you are new to the church this can get really annoying. Our good friend, Eric Landram, who is a pastor at the Lititz Church of the Brethren, is newer to the denomination. At one Annual Conference, someone attempted to play the Brethren name game with Eric and said, "Wait, Landram isn't a Brethren name," to which Eric responded, "It is now." Whether or not Landram was an historical Brethren name, the fact that Eric is Brethren makes it a Brethren name now and he becomes a part of shaping what it means to be Brethren.

Likewise, how are those who are not raised by their biological parents shaped by their family? What about those who are adopted or fostered?

It is actually common for adoptive families to hear that their child looks like them. How can this be so? According to Julie Drew, this is called "attunement," a developmental process in children. Children learn how to mirror or tune in to the facial expressions their parents make. This is how children learn how to respond to events or external triggers — by watching how

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<sup>1</sup> Car Names: "What should you name your car?" [namesforcars.com](http://namesforcars.com)

their role models respond. The indirect effect is that a child's facial expressions will look like his or her parents. Since the child has learned expressions like glad, sad, mad and scared from the faces of their parents, their face mirrors what they have seen. So, it doesn't matter if the parent and child actually share genetics; they may look similar because they share similar expressions.<sup>2</sup>

Being Christian has a similar kind of attunement. Paul talks about us in the book of Romans as being children of God, adopted into a whole new identity, status and set of relationships. In the Church of the Brethren, we embody this by calling each other brother or sister. Some of us may indeed be related, but even without a biological connection, what do we, as children of God, share that makes us recognizable as family? How would someone know that we are family, even if we don't share physical features? According to Paul, it is the Spirit that bears witness through us that we are God's children. It is not through any personal accomplishment that we are able to claim the title "children of God," but only by being led by the spirit.

Paul talks about two types of spirits in this section of Romans — one of slavery and one of adoption. The spirit of slavery is one ruled by fear. A slave is afraid of a master who rules over them and subjugates them. This is not the type of spirit we have received. Instead we are gifted with a spirit of adoption. This is a spirit of intimacy. Instead of seeing God as an oppressive master, we are to see God as Father and one another as children of the same Father. The title "children of God" was originally reserved only for Israel. But through Christ, those who can claim this status are all who have the Spirit of Christ. Those who are filled with the Spirit can now have "the same status, security, and privilege as birth children."<sup>3</sup> All can be adopted into this faith family.

In Roman law, there was no legal distinction between adopted and biological children. For those claiming their identity in Christ, this means we are also joint heirs with God's son. We can even use the same intimate language for God that Jesus used — Abba — which is like calling God, Daddy. Paul assures us that if we call on God with such intimate language, God will hear. This is the type of close relationship God wants to have with humanity.

The indicator that we are truly God's family, that we are all related to one another, is that we will have God's Spirit dwelling within us. Whether or not we share genetics, we are connected by the Spirit. And this indwelling attunes us to God and to one another.

John Toews, in his commentary on this text, says that Paul is not calling followers of Christ to be people of faith, but people of the Spirit. For Paul, this may mean that he cares less about people who have every theological concern figured out and more about people who can walk in the way of Christ, inspired by the Spirit. You may not know every detail of where the Spirit is going to take you, but you need to jump in anyway.

George Cladis tells of his experience as a boy learning the circles dances from his Greek American heritage. He was tentative to join in, not knowing all the steps of the dance. He writes, "How to master the steps? The moves? The sway and bob? Jumping in looked risky — as if one false move would sink a group of flowing Greeks into a pile on the floor. But jump I did! ... into linked arms clasped strong to the shoulder. I rose with the billowing tide, this way, then that ... I wasn't to master the steps before the dance; I was to jump in and let the dance carry, show, instruct and ride me on the music to deep delight."

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<sup>2</sup> "Why do adopted children look like their parents?" [americanadoptions.com](http://americanadoptions.com). Retrieved April 16, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Romans: Believers Church Commentary

In the Lord's prayer, we ask for God's will to be done. We may not know in every detail what we are asking when we pray these words. With boldness, we ask for God to bring the kingdom that was announced and inaugurated by Christ. We pray for the Spirit to burst into our mundane living, like at Pentecost, and fill us so that we can be about God's holy work. Frederick Buechner reminds us that it is only by beginning the prayer with the words, "Our Father," that we can handle such a bold prayer, knowing that to truly say these words may mean letting go of our current reality for God's intended reality. If God's kingdom were to suddenly blow into our reality like the violent wind and tongues of fire of Pentecost, what would stand and what would fall? What would be welcomed in and what would be thrown out? Would we be afraid? Buechner writes: "If God is indeed something like a father, then as something like children maybe we can risk approaching him anyway."<sup>4</sup>

As God's children, adopted into the divine family, we are heirs of the promises of our faith ancestors, along with Christ, our brother. This is not an earthly inheritance, for Paul reminds us that we may suffer like Christ in this world. In fact, Paul even goes so far as to say that we will suffer like Christ so that we can be glorified like Christ. But rest assured, we are promised a heavenly inheritance when we are filled with the Spirit of Christ. We, too, can become sons and daughters of the living God, grafted into the family tree. No DNA test required. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> "Whistling in the Dark: A Doubter's Dictionary" by Frederick Buechner