

Several years back, a lot of churches began the practice of ending worship service by joining hands and singing what I would call a “goodbye song.” We do that here, as most of you know.

The first time I remember ever doing this was at the church I grew up in, North Cross United Methodist Church, and it was for a special event. Our associate pastor was moving on, and we were singing a special goodbye to him. I was still a teenager. (Okay, I said ‘several years back’.)

We all got up, made a circle around the entire Sanctuary, joined hands and sang the song which we just played, as recorded by Charley Pride. I hope you took note of the chorus:

“You know we’re all his children,
His next of kin, that’s the way it began,
No matter where you’re going, or where you’ve been,
You’re part of the family of man.”

It’s from a movie, “Sometimes a Great Notion,” so it wasn’t exactly a hymn, not what we might expect for church.

Yet, what do you know! It’s the same theme as what Paul was writing in the book of Ephesians.

We are all God’s children. In the Bible passage, it’s put differently than “next of kin;” it’s “adoption as God’s children, through Jesus Christ.”

Adoption is really a wonderful thing—choosing to take a child as family. For human beings, these days, adoption of a child can be quite an undertaking.

I found a wonderful story about adoption which I wanted to share with you. It’s from the book Home to Harmony, by Philip Gulley. The narrator is Sam, who is the pastor of a Quaker church, also called Friends Meeting, in the make-believe town of Harmony, Indiana. Frank is the church’s secretary. He got hired because this grumpy old guy at the church—which only happens in fictional churches—hired him, because otherwise he just knew that Sam, the pastor, would run off with any female secretary they would get, because that is how pastors are. Anyway, it worked—Sam did not run off with the secretary, Frank, a widower, and a Korean war veteran.

“Paul and Judy Iverson moved here from the city, attended worship on their very first Sunday, and stunned us by returning a second time.

. . . Miriam Hodge had talked with the Iversons both times they were here. She told us everything she knew about them. They had been married eleven years. Paul was a schoolteacher.

Miss Fishbeck was retiring at the end of the school year, and Paul Iverson was to be her replacement. They’d bought an old house and moved here early to fix it up.”

“We’ll need a church nursery,” Miriam said. “They’re adopting a baby. All the way from China.”

That pretty well silenced us. It took a while to digest that. A Chinese baby. In Harmony.

Paul and Judy had tried since they were married to have children, but couldn't. Then one day they watched a television show about baby girls in China left in the streets to die. It was more than they could bear. They very next week Judy read a story in a magazine about a couple who had gone to China to adopt a baby girl. There was a phone number at the end of the article you could call for information.

They called.

Now it was a year later, and they were three weeks away from going to China to get their baby girl. They'd told Miriam all about it, about having to fly to Los Angeles, then to Hong Kong, then to Beijing, then taking an overnight train to get their baby girl.

So the church needed a nursery, and soon. We didn't have one. When our meetinghouse had been built in 1826, nurseries were not a high priority. Back in those days, children suffered through worship right alongside their parents.

Miriam said, "You know, there's that storage closet just inside the door. I think that would hold a couple cribs and a rocker. We could fix it up nice."

So that's what we did. Miriam Hodge sewed new curtain. Dale Hinshaw painted the wall yellow, and his wife hung Panda bear wallpaper so the little girl would feel at home. The Friendly Women's Circle [that is the church's women's group] paid for the new carpet. It was beautiful. It was ready for a little Chinese baby.

We dedicated the nursery the Sunday before Paul and Judy left for China. We had a prayer and sang "Jesus Loves the Little Children." I quoted from Mark 10: 14, where Jesus told us to suffer the little children. . . . Paul thanked us and Judy cried. Then we ate cake and drank red punch, but not on the new carpet.

A baby! Just think of it. A baby in the meeting. In our very own nursery. A little girls with a good tan and dark hair. In our nursery.

They left that Tuesday. Traveled for three days. On Friday, the phone rand in the meetinghouse office. Frank the secretary answered. It was Paul and Judy. There was a lo9t of static and he could hardly hear them.

Then the static stopped, just for a moment, and he heard Judy say "Twins." Twins! Then he heard the word "Siamese." At least that's what it sounded like. Then the phone went dead and that was it.

Frank sat at his desk, stunned. Siamese twins. Paul and Judy Iverson had adopted Siamese twins. Oh my.

Frank didn't know what to think. He walked into the nursery and looked at the crib. It was an old crib, but Mrs. Dale Hinshaw had painted it and we'd bought a new mattress for it.

It won't be big enough, Frank thought. Not for Siamese twins. He'd seen pictures of Siamese twins. They'd need a bigger crib. Those poor kids. Poor Paul and Judy. Such brave people to adopt these children, to give them a chance at life. What fine people.

Maybe he should tell someone. He wasn't sure. Maybe he should call Bob Miles, Jr. at the *Herald* and get a fund drive going. Maybe set out a change jar at the Coffee Cup [café]. Then he decided against it.

No use in making a spectacle of this, he thought. No sense in getting people all worked up. Folks will find out soon enough. He marveled again at Paul and Judy. Such brave, kind people.

Frank knew then what he'd do. He'd build a new crib. A big crib. A crib for the Iverson Siamese twins.

He stayed up that night, drawing the plans. His idea was a simple one—he'd cut two matching cribs, remove one side from each crib, and fasten the cribs together. Yes, that would work. It would be expensive, but it would be worth it. He'd pay for it himself. He didn't have much money, but he had enough. He'd been saving to buy a new lawn mower, but this was more important.

It took him a week to build it. The Iversons were due at church the next Sunday. On Saturday, he took the cribs apart and hauled them to the meetinghouse. It was hot, hard work. He carried them down the sidewalk and up the stairs into the meetinghouse.

It took two hours to put the cribs together. They filled the nursery. Frank checked for rough edges and splinters. He didn't want the babies to hurt themselves. Those poor children would have enough to overcome. He ran his finger over the finish. It was smooth as a Siamese baby's bottom.

He stretched the new sheets on the mattresses. It brought back memories of his little girl. Forty years ago. Making her little bed. Now she was grown and four states away. His two granddaughters were

with her. He saw them once a year at Christmas. He barely knew them. He tried not to think about it.

Then he thought of those little Siamese twins. Those sweet little girls. He would help take care of them. He'd helped care for children once before. They'd need extra help, extra love. He could do it.

He was sure of it. Everything would be fine. Maybe this was why God had brought him to Harmony Friends. To help the Iversons.

Then another thought came to mind. What would they wear? He worried about that. Judy would be too busy to sew. Paul would be teaching school.

Frank thought, I'll learn to sew. I can do that. It can't be that hard.

He remembered back to his mother sewing on a Singer treadle. Pumping up and down, feeding the material past the needle. He could do that. He'd make them dresses. He'd buy them shoes. Oh, he hadn't even thought of that. How many shoes would they need? Two? Three? Four? He wasn't sure.

He stood back from the crib and looked at it. It was lovely. It was big, but it was beautiful. Pained white with little ducky sheets. The twins deserved it. He was so proud.

Then Frank returned home and went down to the basement, to his wife's sewing room. It was the first time he'd been in it since her death. It was just as she'd left it. It even smelled like her. He looked at her sewing machine. It wasn't anything like his mother's. He couldn't find the switch to turn it on. He called Fern Hampton of the Friendly Women's Circle.

"Can you sew?" he asked her.

"Of course," she answered. Why do you want to know?"

"I can't say," Frank told her. "Just be ready."

The next day was Sunday. He woke up early. He wore his best suit and got to the meetinghouse an hour before church. He dusted the crib and refolded the blankets. He wiped down the changing table.

Diapers! Oh my, what would those Siamese twins do for diapers? Diapers could be a problem.

Get a grip on yourself, Frank told himself. You can't worry about these things. Everything will be fine. Trust the Lord.

People began to arrive for worship. They gain the front hallway, waiting for the Iversons.

Frank hoped everyone would be polite, would not stare or gasp. Then he thought, These are good people. They'll come through.

He heard someone yell, "Here they come!" and the front doors opened, and there stood Paul and Judy holding their Chinese twins. Paul held one and Judy held the other. Chinese twins!

People were shocked. Twins! They couldn't believe it. Beautiful, precious Chinese twins. People were shocked.

Judy asked, "didn't Frank tell you? We called to tell you we had twins."

Everyone turned and looked at Frank.

You don't live seventy years without being quick on your feet. Frank said, "I've been too busy to tell anyone. I've made them a crib. Come see."

They filed into the nursery. A handful of people squeezed in around the crib. The rest of the Quakers peered in from the doorway, observing.

"Oh, Frank, it's beautiful," Judy said. They laid the Chinese twins on the ducky sheets. Two little girls with good tans and dark hair. Frank had never seen such black hair.

Frank stayed with the twins in the nursery while everyone else worshiped in the meeting room. Miriam Hodge helped him. He'd hold one, then the other. He changed their diapers. It all came back.

Two wipes, three swipes, a fresh diaper, then a kiss on the head and you're done. Like riding a bicycle, your never forget.

Finally, he held them both. Rocking in the chair. Back and forth. Back and forth. One of the girls took his finger, then the other one did the same. They began sucking, their little gums nubbing on this fingers.

He'd forgotten that feeling.

He thought of his two little granddaughters. He hadn't seen them since t he funeral. Wouldn't see them until Christmas. At least he hoped he'd see them then. His daughter had phoned the week before and told him not to get his hopes up, that the girls were in ballet and had to practice every day. Plus, they were taking French lessons.

He wondered at that. French lessons? Why in the world did kids living in North Carolina need to speak French? . . .

[But] Paul and Judy and twins lived around the corner from Frank.

Frank took to stopping by every day, on his way home from the meetinghouse. He'd sit with the kids while Paul worked on the house and Judy took a nap. . . .

Not only did Paul and Judy adopt two little baby girls, but Frank and the whole church adopted them and the parent as family.

That is how churches are meant to be. With God's help, churches are that way.

Sometimes, though, we refuse God's help. Our sinful human ways get going, and we find ourselves at odds.

That's what was happening in the early Christian churches, and this letter Paul wrote to the Ephesians was addressing that problem. Back then, there were lots of Jewish converts to Christianity, and there were lots of non-Jewish, Gentile converts to Christianity. It was supposed to be one big, happy family. But it wasn't.

There was way too much "I'm better than you, because. . ."

That still crops up in churches, sad to say. We have newer Christians versus long-time Christians. We have folks feeling superior to others for one reason or another.

That's crazy! We are all here by God's grace and love. We are all saved by Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Even going beyond this kind of issue is what Eugene Peterson describes this way:

"What we know about God and what we do for God have a way of getting broken apart in our lives. The moment the . . . unity of belief and behavior is damaged in any way, we are incapable of living out the full humanity for which we were created.

Paul's letter to the Ephesians joins together what has been torn apart in our sin-wrecked world. He begins with an exuberant exploration of what Christians believe about God, and then, just like a surgeon skillfully setting a compound fracture, "sets" this belief in God into our behavior before God so that the bones—belief and behavior—knit together and heal.

Once our attention is called to it, we notice these fractures all over the place! There is hardly a bone in our bodies that has escaped injury, hardly a relationship in city or job, school or church, family or country, that isn't out of joint or limping in pain. There is much work to be done. (Eugene Peterson, The Message, introduction to Ephesians)

We need to be Christian all the way through, deep in our bones. Our hearts and lives need to be lied out in Christ's teachings__

"Love God with all you've got."

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

If we are putting our Christianity into a Sundays only time-slot, pretty soon we'll stop being Christians. We'll be separating ourselves from God and from the family God has for us.

Of course, we all mess up sometimes. We take a step away from God, and one another. But with God's help and forgiveness, we turn around, make amends, and make up with God and with family.

My hope and prayer for us is that we will all be brothers and sisters to one another in Christ, as God has been planning since before the foundation of the world.

Amen.

(by Reverend Sally J. DeMasters)