

Title: *Called You by Name*

Text: Romans 8:12-25

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Have you ever made a decision that had unintended consequences? I think we all relate to doing something, thinking we are solving one set of problems, and then having our solutions take an unexpected direction. Let me tell you of an unintended consequence and how it affected my life. My daughter is adopted from China, and our family is concerned with China's current situation as it relates to the world, particularly the USA, and China's long history that predates most of our European ancestors. Most especially, I want to share something from China's recent past, and in that past, there was an unintended consequence.

Following the Communist Revolution in China in 1949, Mao Zedong (Chairman Mao) believed that the country's best protection and defense against foreign military intervention (from Japan, Korea, Russia, or the USA) would be to grow its already large population. The government policy was to encourage and reward families with high birthrates. Millions of Chinese families happily complied by producing large families of six, seven, or even more children. Yet, this policy had unknown issues because the population quickly surpassed the billion mark.

This birth policy had long-lasting and unintended consequences, which caused China (in the 70s), amid a rather severe famine, to face a potential food shortage of drastic proportions due to its large population. Thus, the government made another decision that led to another set of unintended consequences. China's government imposed the one-child per couple restriction as a means of immediate and dramatic coping with its looming human disaster.

Further recall, China doesn't have a social security program or retirement system. Traditionally, the elder son (and his wife) cares for their elderly parents. With this one-child policy, the birth of a daughter could mean an unsure and uncertain old age. Although daughters might be valued and loved, sons were often the more pragmatic choice. For the birth and rearing of a son was a family's protection for the future. A daughter was frequently viewed as less valuable and considered a luxury. Particularly in farming villages, where male labor was essential, the "pragmatic choice" was one of two choices: either infanticide or abandonment. Girl babies, sometimes with red strings tied around their wrists to signal the hope for an auspicious outcome, were found—often having been left in a place where they were apt to be discovered before they were killed by wild animals.

Today, there is a relaxation of that policy, but its effects are far-reaching. After years of gender selection, the one-child decision produced an unintended consequence. Reports were that for every 120 males born, roughly 100 females are also born. I am not sure I believe the reports, but that is the number. Thus, a 5 to 4 male/female imbalance in the 70s, 80s, and 90s was the consequence of tinkering with nature. Until 2015, the one-child policy was still in effect.

This morning, I want us to step into a situation in January 2005, in Jiangxi Province, China, where a tiny girl was born, and another mother (and perhaps father) was presented with a dilemma. For the first few days, the struggle must have been hard. "Do we keep our precious little girl and live with an uncertain future, or do we make a different choice and, like so many others over the years, abandon her to a safe zone?" Abandonment was the final decision. This baby was left in a known "safe zone" outside the municipal doors in the town of Tonggu, China.

Eventually, that child found her way into the local orphanage and into the foster home of her foster family.

Often, in the case of abandoning these baby girls, there is some pre-agreement within the family. Someone wraps her in a blanket, along with her bottle, and takes her away from the family. A trusted relative, such as an aunt, grandmother, or even her mother, carries her on a long bus ride. Since abandonment was a punishable crime by up to nine years in a Chinese prison, babies were usually taken to cities some distance from where they were born, so the task of abandonment was kept a secret. So, they won't be so easily recognized and traced.

The end of the first leg of this little girl's journey can't be romanticized. Sometime on that February evening, she was left on the sidewalk outside the entrance of the county's Civil Affairs Bureau. That spot, like many others in China, was chosen because many people would be coming and going, and she would be easily found. I sometimes wonder about that moment. Did the person stay to see her picked up? Did she immediately go back to her tears, go back to the bus, and return home to report that the child was okay? We'll never know. We do know the little girl was found and taken to a hospital for evaluation. That we do know, then she went to the Tonggu Welfare Institute, an orphanage in Jiangxi. Due to ongoing renovations, the little girl was fostered with a family that was paid to care for her and another foster child.

Somewhere in this process, the little girl was given a name: Tong Min Ye. Tong, for the district; Min, meaning citizen—the name given to many girls found abandoned; and Ye, meaning light (or so I was told). This little girl was rescued from an evil human plan with unintended consequences and named “Citizen of the Light”. Isn't that beautiful?

What does all this have to do with you and me? Paul shows us clearly that our faith is to be built on nothing less than God's grace, which rescues us from every form of slavery, even slavery to a haunted conscience. Both the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther knew this and expended a great deal of energy preaching that our salvation is by faith alone and grace alone! Probably Paul would even nudge us to remember that our greatest hope doesn't lie in our cherished Reformed tradition itself, but rather in the well that never runs dry and spills over, offering grace to the entire world. For you see, God's got the whole world, including each one of us here, gathered into God's precious and gracious hands.

(Sing “God's Got the Whole World in God's Hands”)

When we left the little girl in China, she was with her foster family—growing, learning, laughing, clapping to music, and being cherished. But her story doesn't end there. While she was unaware, others across the world were making decisions and preparing to welcome her. In the early 2000s, thousands of Chinese girls were adopted each year into families from Bavaria to Brazil, but this little girl, MY little girl, was destined to become a US citizen. As Paul said, when the fullness of time had come, she would be adopted, with all the privileges that status entails.

Adoption is a metaphor used frequently in the epistles. In today's Scripture, Paul said, “You did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received a spirit of adoption.” (Rm. 8:15) The writer of the letter to the church at Ephesus says, “just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love, [God] destined us for adoption as (God's) children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.” (Eph. 1:4-

5) Hear again Paul's words to the Galatians: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons and daughters." Paul was aware of and preached our adoption. We are adopted children of God!!!! Praise be God's holy name.

Min Ye's adoption was a legal process agreed to by two countries for the benefit of their citizens. It didn't happen through her choice, her will, or even by virtue of her merits. **Our** adoption is an act of God's grace, a gift we acknowledge in baptism. Min Ye did nothing to earn her adoption, and neither do we. We didn't make a deal with God. How could we? As imperfect as all human endeavors are, can we not do anything? Our membership in the family of God didn't come from OUR birth; it came through JESUS' birth! It's the result of God's "invasive act of liberation". We've been liberated from being Jewish or Gentile, Republican or Eskimo; Chinese or United States, clergy or cook; we are freed from having holes in our hearts or in our heads. Let me say it another way, we (you and me) are adopted by a gracious God who loves us as God's precious children, and we are the family of God.

In the past, when a child's parents brought her to be baptized, a name would be given to her. Now, we'll never know by what name Min Ye's birth family called her, but, by the grace of God, the name she was assigned couldn't have been more promising: Men Ye, citizen of light, our Christian symbol of rebirth, resurrection, and new life is God's child. "The light came into the world, and the darkness could not overcome it. In her new life, she was legally adopted the moment the airplane wheels touched the tarmac in New York—her symbolic foot on US soil, and the new name she had been given by the parents who brought her home, Kara MinYe Bellis, was official. She became part of a family in which she was a daughter, granddaughter, niece, and cousin. She became a resident of the Commonwealth of Virginia and a U.S. citizen. Two different people, whose lives were not complete until the tapestries of our lives were woven together, joined in the spirit of adoption.

God confidently invites us to be witnesses to God's love, a love that brings us home and proclaims, "You belong here." Baptism is a powerful reminder of our adoption, firmly establishing our place in the Kingdom. In this sacred act, we receive a grace so profound that it grants us a new name. When we genuinely listen to the depths of our faith, we can hear it clearly.

Are you ready to recognize it? Hear God proclaim, "For I have called you by name and you are mine." Like my daughter, Kara, we are living in two kingdoms, and we proudly carry the name "Child of the Covenant." Thanks be to God!

Prayer of Illumination

Almighty God, in you are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Open our eyes that we may see the wonders of your Word; and give us grace that we may clearly understand and freely choose the way of your wisdom; through Christ our Lord. Amen.

Romans 8:12-25

Therefore, brothers (and sisters), we have an obligation-- but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who the Spirit of God leads are (children) of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

The (Holy) Spirit testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs-- heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits in eager expectation for the (children) of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as (children), the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what (one) already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait patiently for it.