

**“Simplicity to Complexity to Simplicity”**

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Over the past month, as I change jobs and my son Josh prepares to move away for college, my family and I have been cleaning out areas of my house.

I've happened upon little childhood treasures — like collections of butterflies, and pressed leaves, and crayon drawings. I've discovered notes I made myself and tucked in between the pages of books some 20 plus years ago.

Reminders and mementos of a time now past ... of versions of myself and my children we each have outgrown ....

Pop rock poet Stevie Nicks was right ...

“time makes you bolder

Even children get older

I'm getting older too.”

Growth, change, just plain getting older

These are the realities of our lives on this pale blue dot we call earth.

We start in childhood simplicity, move into the complexity of adolescence and adulthood and, if we are a bit lucky and a bit wise, we find ourselves in a mature simplicity that is able to hold both the deep complexities and paradoxes of experience with child-like joy and wonder.

The philosopher of interpretation Paul Ricoeur called this mature simplicity a second naïveté. Popular spiritual teacher Richard Rohr describes it as a process of order, disorder, reorder.

It is a helpful framework to approach today reading from Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome.

One cannot simply accept Paul at face value, uncritically. Any plain common sense reading of Paul must be complicated and problematized because Paul, himself, and how Paul's writing has been used across the centuries, has been complex and problematic.

Many of the so-called “clobber texts” in the scriptures that have been used to justify slavery, patriarchy, heterosexism, and various forms of Christian nationalism are found in Paul' letters.

When reading Paul, well truth be told when reading any scripture but especially when reading Paul, one must move from simplicity to complexity to simplicity, again.

So let's complexify Paul, because There is a lot of unpack in this scripture.

At the heart of the reading is the idea that Christians, followers of Christ, are children of God.

“Children of God” was a concept found in both Greco-Roman and Jewish cultures, predating Christianity.

Early Christians took up this metaphor to describe how they understood their relationship to both God and Jesus, and other Christians — a child of God and a sibling of Jesus and each other. These relationships were intimate and familial in nature, offering a sense of belonging, safety, and community.

It also had an ethical dimension — children of God were to be like God. Think here of Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount — “Blessed are the Peacemakers for they shall be called Children of God.” Kind, compassionate, and just, children of God were called to treat each other as siblings and overcome the ancient social structures of prejudice, the dividing lines of Jew and Greek; slave and citizen, man and woman.

Paul in today’s reading adds the dimension of solidarity in suffering. The cry, “Abba, Father” is, as Latin American liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez point out in his book on Job, a reference to Jesus’s cry from the cross during his public torture and execution. Further, Paul turns from a patriarchal metaphor for God to a maternal metaphor for the process of new creation, writing about the labor of pains and the birthing of a new creation.

Within the Methodist tradition, John Wesley, one of the primary founders and spiritual ancestors of Methodism, interpreted this and related scriptures as a framework for spiritual growth and maturity. Wesley distinguished between the “faith of a servant” and the “faith of a child.” The faith of a servant was, for Wesley, rule-based, focused on obedience, and characterized by fear and anxiety about getting it wrong. The faith of a child, conversely, was love-based, focused on relationships, and characterized by joy and assurance of one’s relationship with God and place in the world. Wesley used this distinction to encourage early Methodists to grow and develop in their faith — from obedience to rules to love in relationships.

Intimate relationship. Ethical behavior. Solidarity in suffering and laboring for a new world that is set right. Maturity in faith.

Like I said, a lot to unpack here.

But if that was not enough, we also have to admit this text — like much of Paul’s letters and those letters attributed to Paul found in the New Testament — is just downright problematic.

Not all family and intimate relationships are characterized by kindness, compassion, care, mutuality ... by love. Family and intimate relationships can be the source of harm and dysfunction. This was true in the ancient world, and it is true now. Using familial parent, child

and sibling language to describe one's relationship with God and others can be an obstacle and reopen old wounds depending on one's experience of their family of origin

The text references slavery. Like most references to slaves and slavery in the Bible, it takes that institution as a given, offering no scathing ethical judgment about its evil nor imagining a world where it does not exist. The reality of slavery is just a given for Paul.

The text perpetuates gender hierarchies. Here, Paul deploys the common motif of Sky-Father-God who is above and over the Earth-Mother. The text reinforces gender binaries and gender roles that, again, are understood to be a given and demonstrate the lack of imagination of a world characterized by gender equality, equity and diversity.

Family trauma. Slavery. Patriarchy and Misogyny.

Again, so much to unpack here!

Complexity upon complexity upon complexity!

What does it mean to journey through this complexity to an integrated simplicity, to a second naïveté, to a wholistic Re-ordering ... a mature faith that does not get stuck in the blind acceptance of pre-critical simplicity or the endless de-constructive round of complexified criticism ... but comes to a place that is able to live in the "both, and" truth of paradox, delight in the beauty of simile and metaphor, and share the goodness at the heart of reality.

Is it possible? I hope so.

The world needs a clear, confident, convicted word. It needs good news.

Paul was trying to capture his life-changing experience of the divine in limited images, similes, metaphors with his own limited perspective.

How might we undertake the same task?

We are heirs of this good news; it is our inheritance. The scriptures authorize and inspire us to write our own stories about relationship to God and neighbor. It invites us not to just recite the words of Scripture to riff on their words, but to make them our own.

Paul says our relationship with God is like the relationship between child and parent.

Paul says standing in solidarity with those who suffer is like crying out with Jesus on the cross.

Paul says the process of change and transformation, in our lives and in the structures of society, is like giving birth.

Maybe these sacred similes work for you. Maybe they don't.

If they do, one must take care of their limitations and histories.

If they don't, then what similes might better reflect your relationship with God, how you stand in solidarity with those who suffer, and change and growth in your life?

Maybe God is like the root of a tree, Jesus is like the trunk, and we are like the branches?

Maybe standing in solidarity with suffering is like crying out with God's Spirit - "We shall overcome!" or "the people united will never be divided" or "know justice, know peace."

Maybe the process of changing our lives or society is like painting or throwing pottery or composing a poem.

What sacred similes would you use?

My hope is that together in this community, we are able to support each other as we move through our own journeys from simplicity to complexity to simplicity again. That together we can be a community who is able:

- to wrestle with the tough and critical questions of life,
- to discover how to claim our authority to speak our truth about our relationships with God and our neighbors,
- to grow and mature in our faith.