

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023

**Romans 8:12-17**

**CHILDREN OF THE FATHER**

Many of you probably remember the movie 'Finding Nemo', which came out, believe it or not, 20 years ago in 2003. If you are a bit younger chances are you watched this movie a lot when you were growing up, and if you're older and have children it is very possible you watched it a number of times with them, or maybe even with your grandchildren. It is one of those great Disney/Pixar stories. I just want to focus on the beginning of that movie. You may or may not remember that the movie begins with two clownfish living on the Great Barrier Reef, Marlin and Coral, who together have a large clutch of eggs. One day, along comes a barracuda which ends up eating Coral and all of the eggs, except one. Faithful father Marlin cares for this egg, and when it has hatched, his son, Nemo. He is caring and protective like any parent, but because of what happened to the rest of his family, not surprisingly he is more protective than most. He always told Nemo not to swim out beyond the shelf, but Nemo, on his first day of school and egged on by his friends, does just that. Nemo is captured by a diver and taken away from his distressed father.

We know that Nemo ends up in an aquarium in a dentist surgery in Sydney, and the rest of the movie is about Marlin's loving and courageous efforts to find and then rescue his son, no matter what the cost and the danger to himself.

As we think about this movie, and there are many others like it, there are two basic themes here which relate very well to the Bible reading we are looking at today. The first is that Nemo got in trouble because he disobeyed his father, plain and simple. Marlin told him that it was too dangerous to go out into the deeper water, but Nemo, like many children, and we've probably all been there, knew better. And straight away the bad thing his father had been dreading, his child being taken away from him, happened. And the second theme is that even though it was Nemo's own fault, by his own disobedient choice, that he got himself into trouble, Marlin risked even his own life to find and rescue him, to get

him back. Nemo was his child, and no matter what Nemo did Marlin would do anything to protect him. They are themes and plots which are used often in books and movies, stories both old and new. It is a story which we can relate to very well, although hopefully not to the same level of drama. It is a well-known story. A common story. A very human story.

And as we look at this reading we have here today, and perhaps think about other parts of the Bible, like the parable of the Prodigal Son, this story of rebellion and rescue in the relationship of a parent and child is one which also applies very much to our relationship with God, our Heavenly Father. In fact, if we look right back to Adam and Eve, we can say that it's in this relationship that it all began.

Have a look at the reading we have here. In this part of his letter to the Romans, Paul, as he does in many of his other writings, emphasises that we are God's children. We are not His slaves, or His servants, or His friends. We are His *children*. We might hear this so often that we take it for granted, but that is such a perfect picture and image to sum up our relationship with God, isn't it; a parent and a child? What does that say about our relationship with God? It says that He loves us unconditionally, and without end. It says that we rely on Him in all things. It says that He always wants what is best for us. It says that He wants a loving and close relationship with us. From our side, it says that we can trust Him. It says that we can know that what He tells us is best for us. It also means that in the same way that when we have a good relationship with our parents we want to do things which please them, out of thanks and gratitude for what they have done for us, we also want to worship and serve God because we know and are thankful for His love and what it means in our lives. It is a relationship that from God's side means we can always trust and rely on His love, and from our side we both trust that He is guiding us to do what is best for us and others, and we want to show what He means to us in our response to Him.

And how do we become God's children? Paul makes it very plain here; 'God's Spirit makes us sure that we are his children. His Spirit lets us know that together with Christ we will be given what God has promised.' (v. 16, 17a) It's not our decision, it's not our action, it comes from God. Yes, our response comes into how it actually turns out, but initially it is both God's initiative and God's action.

In our worship service again this week we saw that great example of how this works in the baptism of a young child. To this baby, in their baptism, God gives His Spirit and says to them, 'you are my child, I am your Father. I will always love you. I will always do everything I can to keep you close to me'. Through the Spirit coming to us in our Baptism, we are joined to God in the most intimate and unconditional relationship there is; the perfect love of a parent and a child.

God has made that same promise to each one of us, no matter how long ago your baptism was, no matter if you remember it or not. Because you being made a child of God does not rely on you, but the love of the Father which was shown in Jesus dying on the cross comes to you through the Holy Spirit. It is both God's promise and God's gift. The Father never stops loving, never stops caring, never stops wanting to protect you and keep you safe. Nothing can change the Father's love for us.

Can we move away from that love? Absolutely, just like we know that human children can turn their backs on their parents, just like we saw Nemo disregard his father's protective but good advice about swimming out into the deeper water. Like Nemo, we move away from God, do things we know aren't right, listen to others instead of our Father, and what happens? We get ourselves in trouble, and we can end up breaking our relationship with Him. That's why this reading begins with; 'My dear friends, we must not live to satisfy our desires. If you do, you will die. But you will live, if by the help of God's Spirit you say "No" to your desires.' (v. 12, 13) How often do we get ourselves into trouble, damage or ruin relationships, cause ourself worry and stress, because we go against God, decide that our way is better, ignore the One who loves us unconditionally and only wants what is best for us? How often do we fail to say 'No' to our selfishness, to put our pride in its proper place, not see and respond to the needs of others, not treat others as we want to be treated, and in all of these not want to worship and serve God with our whole lives? How often do we swim out into the deeper water where we are warned not to go, and end up getting in trouble because of that?

And when we do that, and we know we do because sadly, even as God's children, there is this ongoing battle in us between following God and following our own desires and others, what is God's response? Just like Marlin in the movie, and most human parents, God's response is to do all He can to

bring us back to Him and keep us close to Him. We see this best by His sending Jesus, His beloved and perfect Son, to die on the cross for us. That is a sacrifice which shows how great the Father's love for us really is. And again, the promise is there that we will be joined to what Jesus has done for us; we may go away, but He is always doing and offering everything He can to have us back with Him. As human parents we aren't always perfect. We can even have our limits, the times when we have to say, 'enough', sometimes understandably so. This is where God's love for us is even greater than the most patient human parent; nothing can ever make Him stop loving us, caring for us, doing all He can for us. He has already gone through everything He can, made every sacrifice He can, to keep us close and strong with Him.

Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, which He offers to each person, we have the certainty of God's love, as children of the Father, so that we know He is with us in everything we go through, and that nothing will ever stop Him loving us. This means we can trust Him, and follow Him, not out of fear as slaves, but because we know He loves us and only calls us to do what is best for us. But even that we can't do alone, but only by asking for His help through the Spirit, which He gladly gives us. We are children of the Father, because that is who He has made us to be. As the Father whose love knows no end, no boundaries, with His help we can now always seek to worship, trust, and follow Him. Amen.

### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- What other stories or movies can you think of which are based on the theme of rebellion and rescue in the relationship between a child and parent?
- How does that theme relate to your relationship with God, your heavenly Father?
- Have a look at the Bible reading. What does it say to you about how you become a child of God? Reflect on the Holy Spirit coming to you through your Baptism, Holy Communion, God's Word. What comfort and assurance does God give you through these means of Grace?
- As children of the Father, not only do we know and have the assurance of God's love, but we are now called to follow and serve Him in a loving response. Are there any areas of your life in which you struggle to do this? Bring these to God and ask for His help in these struggles.

Pray: thank God that He has made us His children through the power of the Holy Spirit. Thank Him for His unconditional and unending love which He has shown to us in Jesus. Pray for the strength of the Spirit to live lives which keep us close to Him and seek to worship and serve Him each day.

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler  
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