



THE EPISCOPAL CENTER FOR EMBODIED FAITH
PRESENTS
Theological Reflections on Embodied Faith: Adoption

First Questions?

The Rev. Lee Ann M. Pomrenke

“Congratulations! He is beautiful!”

“Wow, she is so adorable!”

Or from the more clever friends, a quip such as, “You two do good work!”

That's how the accolades begin when a new baby is born into a family. The second wave of comments inevitably move on to:

“She looks just like you!”

“He has your uncle's ears!” or “Who do you think she looks like?”

It is easiest to focus on physical traits, before Baby has much personality to talk about, but is that the only reason our conversations veer in that direction? Our first words to welcome a new child really emphasize that similarity means belonging, starting with our physical bodies.

When a family adopts a child, she or he can still be deemed “adorable” by friends and family, but then well-wishers can get stumped. They might stumble into awkward questions that are none of their business, surprisingly still trying to talk about physical things, such as “What is he? I mean, what's his background?” or “I know she's not *yours*, but she still might have your eyes!” I have 2 daughters: the first we adopted, and the second I birthed. They happen to look alike. If I had a nickel for every time someone has commented with delight - “I know this is not possible, but they just look like sisters!” - I'd invest all my nickels in a PR campaign on speaking appropriately to new parents. To us, our girls *are* sisters, in all the ways that matter. How others think they look does not matter.

Similarity might imply belonging, but it does not create it. Commitment creates belonging, in a family or a church family. We choose, over and over again, to belong to one another regardless of what comes up. Do you ever get the sense that those who are “born into” our church family – and therefore look like previous generations of its membership – are perceived to fit better than anyone who does not (new immigrants, same-sex couples, transgender persons, adoptive families, etc.)? Visual homogeneity can lull us into a sense of comfort. But then once our real differences are discovered, it can feel like a betrayal since we assumed we were “the same.” At least when we look different, we are forced to be honest from the beginning, that to belong to one another is going to require choosing to strengthen and tend that bond repeatedly (for Jesus' sake).

Family resemblances do not make church families, any more than they make strong household families. Opting in and putting effort into creating those bonds makes a family.

Jesus started it. He denies his mother and brothers access to him, to show the new criteria for belonging to the family of Christ: doing God's will (Matthew 12:46-50). Belonging to Jesus' faith family is not passive, not received through birth or heritage. It is something we opt into by seeking after and doing God's will, alongside all the other "siblings" who are doing the same. Being part of Jesus' family is about getting close to him, listening and being changed by Jesus' presence. Jesus' mother and brothers probably felt this distinction as an insult to their family ties by birth. The friction between birth entitlement and new converts has continued to be painful ever since. The integration of Jews and Gentiles into one early "church family" was not easy or natural. Both Jews and Gentiles needed constant reminders that what they had in common could and should overpower what was different. The obvious similarities were not there. Since they neither shared the lineage of the Jewish tradition nor resembled each other in many physical ways (including circumcision) they had to name those differences in order to get to the core that could hold them together.

We have the same struggles today. What if we explicitly named our preference for those who share our family resemblances, addressing it so we can commit to getting past it? When hiring a new staff person or intending to do outreach in the neighborhood, churches could explicitly say what otherwise lingers beneath the surface: "It would probably be most comfortable to look for people who seem most similar to the majority of us, but..." Then we can talk openly about what actually *should* make people belong in our faith communities, and it is not race, accent, family make-up or background. We belong to one another for only one reason, and that is Jesus Christ. Relating to each other in our diversity will necessarily change us, seeking to do God's will.

If Christ is the center to whom this whole "family" belongs, we have to show that we're choosing to opt into belonging to each other before we highlight our differences by asking questions like, "Where are you from?" or "How are your traditions different?" Opting into the church family can start with our first words to one another.

Instead of first questions, let us try exclamations: "We're so glad to meet another part of the family! We're going to learn and grow so much together!"

Reflection Questions:

- 1) What information do you usually share or ask first when meeting someone new?
 - Does that reflect what you most value?
 - Are there changes you might challenge yourself to make, to begin your first conversations differently?

- 2) What are some of the family resemblances you talk about in your family?
 - How might emphasizing these traits build or detract from different members' sense of belonging?
- 3) What cultural/ family resemblances do you talk about in your church?
 - How might emphasizing these traits build or detract from different members' sense of belonging?

For Further Exploration:

- 1) Visit decolonizelutheranism.org or [#decolonizelutheranism](https://twitter.com/decolonizelutheranism) to engage with those confronting the negative impact of overemphasizing cultural heritage or homogeneity among the Lutherans.
- 2) To think about “family resemblances” from a child's perspective, read the children’s early reader chapter book featuring a transracial adoptee as the heroine: Jazzy's Quest: Adopted and Amazing by Carrie Goldman & Juliet Bond. Jazzy is determined to discover what is amazing about herself before the school talent show; will it be a trait in common with her birth family, her adopted family, or something unique to herself?
- 3) For a longer faithful reflection on adoption, I highly recommend the book Love You More: The Divine Surprise of Adopting My Daughter by Jennifer Grant (who happens to be Episcopalian).

About the Author: The Rev. Lee Ann M. Pomrenke is a Lutheran (ELCA) pastor who has served congregations in Virginia and Minnesota. She resides in St. Paul, Minnesota with her husband and two daughters.