

The Rev. Billy Cerveny:

I pray, Lord, that right now, Holy Spirit, you would fall on us, that we would hear what you have for us to hear. I thank you, Jesus. And we pray this in your name. Amen.

Have a seat.

So I love weddings, and I grew up in the church. If any of y'all grew up in the church or around the church, I'm pretty confident that you went to a lot of weddings growing up. And I remember most of the time when I was growing up, I always wanted to be in weddings, and it wasn't until I was 18 years old that I was asked to be in a wedding.

And my friend Jim called me. Jim Weldon he was my young life leader here in Jacksonville at Episcopal High School. And Jim calls me, and he says-- he's been dating this girl for a long time. And he says, Billy, I'm getting married. And I want you to be in my wedding. And I was so honored. I was like, you've got to be kidding me. So in my head, I'm like, what is he going to ask me? Am I going to be the best man? Am I going to be a groomsman? I can't perform it. I'm not a priest. And I said, well, what do you want me to do? Of course, I'll be in your wedding. And he says, I would love for you to be a candle lighter.

And I'm pretty confident that-- I don't remember. But in my head, I lit a candle, not a lot of candles. But all that to say, but when he asked me to be candle lighter, I got to tell you what, I was so honored.

And I was like, yes, man. I will be your candle lighter.

Let me tell you why I was so excited.

Because years earlier, I was in ninth grade. It was kind of a transitional year for most people. And I was really insecure at a really insecure place in my life. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know who I belonged to. My sense of identity was adrift at best.

And I was feeling a little lost. And I was sitting there on the grass at Episcopal High School watching a group of older soccer players juggle a soccer ball in a circle. They were a lot cooler than me. And I was just thinking to myself, man, I would love to be a part of that. And all of a sudden, across the lawn walks Jim. I had not met Jim yet. And Jim comes up. And he's just kind of got the swagger to him. And he says, hey, how you doing? And these guys turn and looked at him. And they lit up. And they welcomed him into the circle. And they started laughing. And they were joking around. And I remember thinking to myself, gosh, I wish he had come up to me.

I wish he had picked me.

Because I want to be invited into that. I wish he had chosen me.

And then almost on cue, Jim lifted his eyes. And he turned to me. And he looked me right in the eyes. And he passed the ball to my feet.

He said, what's your name, man? I said, I'm Billy.

It's nice to meet you. It was kind of cool. All right. And I was going to talk to him for a little bit. And he left. And the next day, he came back.

I remember my name. And he came back again. And he came back again. And again. And again. And he kept showing up. I'm going to tell you about Jim. Not only did we become good friends,

but we went on this journey together. We'd go to Young Life. We'd go surfing together. We'd go on these mission trips together.

He adopted me into this tribe of people that I loved, who had the same sense of humor as me and loved the Lord. And I'll tell you what happened. I had an encounter. Jim showing up. Jim inviting me in, adopting me into his community. It changed not only my sense of identity because I was a part of that group. It changed the way I lived my life.

It changed how I made decisions, how I saw myself, how I saw the rest of my world.

Now, I'd love to say that when I think of that as something of my youth.

And that's true of me now.

I'm the same way.

In fact, when I remember that story, I think about Jim asking me to be his candle lighter. And I was in.

I was totally in. And the reason I was in because I felt important, because I was important to him.

And that's something that's really easy to write off is like, again, the reflections of a child. But guess what? I'm the same way now.

I still want to feel important. Don't you?

Don't you still want someone to come and pick you?

Someone to say, you're with me, to take you under their wing.

Because see, that's not something that we just do as kids. In fact, that's something that runs to the core of my being.

It's something that goes to this foundational place

because that place of being chosen, it informs my identity

because it tells me where I fit into the rest of the world

and where I fit into the story affects how I see my purpose in life. It affects how I see God. It affects how I think other people see me.

And those places that I don't feel picked, those places that I don't feel chosen, that I don't feel like I've been adopted or brought in, guess what? I'm cut adrift. And all I'm left to do is create this caricature of a person that I think

I should be. And maybe one day someone will invite me in. Maybe one day someone will pass the ball to my feet.

This matters not just even to us Christians, this question of identity. This matters especially to us as Christians.

Identity is this huge question at the core of what we talk about with the gospel. And we're going to unpack that a little bit. We're starting this new series.

It's called the Spirit-Filled Life.

And what we're doing is we're looking at the implications of what it means that we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

And this week we're talking about our adoption in Christ.

This is a word that we hear throughout scripture. You can't read the New Testament, or at least chunks of the New Testament, without this image of that word adoption coming forward, or certainly the themes and images of it coming forward. So we're going to unpack that. What I want to talk about today is a question-- is a couple things. What is this adoption stuff?

What does it have to do with my identity? How does that transform my identity? And why does it matter?

So we just read this passage in Luke chapter 16. It's kind of a famous passage. Jesus is sitting there, and he's talking to the Pharisees. And he begins to tell him a parable. We've all heard this parable if you've been around church any length of time. And it tells the story of this exorbitantly rich man, this guy by the name of Lazarus.

And the way that he's described is he's kind of the first century Jeff Bezos. He walks around. He dresses like the artist formerly known as Prince. He wears purple, it says. He eats these elaborate meals. He's got a house with a gate around it, apparently. And he consumes his wealth and all the things associated with it. And by his gate is this man named Lazarus.

And as rich as the rich man was, Lazarus was the photographic negative in poverty. He was the lowest of the low. It said that he laid by his gates and he longed for just the scraps from the rich man's table.

It says he laid there and his body was covered with sores.

And the dogs would come and lick his sores. Ew. Now, just to be clear, those aren't golden retriever like pet dogs.

These are the feral animals that came from the hillside that were dangerous.

And Lazarus was there, starving, and the rich man would pass by him and wouldn't give him a crumb from his table. And Lazarus dies, and the scripture says the angels carried him to Abraham's side.

And the rich man dies, and he wakes up, and he finds himself in Hades, tormented by flames.

And he cries out, he says, "Father Abraham, please help me. This is unbearable. Would you sin, Lazarus? Get Lazarus just to dip his finger in some water and to come and drip it on my tongue."

And Father Abraham replies, "No, no.

So you lived your life and you had your things when you lived your life." And Lazarus suffered the way he did, and the die is cast. It's now time for both of your rewards.

Now again, this is a famous passage, and this is a scary one, isn't it? When you read this, it's kind of a scary passage. It is to me.

It reads like this big, you get what you deserve kind of parable.

Like, finally, it's this giant roll reversal, just desserts.

But when you dig in and you get a little closer, which we're going to do here, you realize it's about something deeper.

It speaks about what it is that we give ourselves to.

What is it that we use to define ourselves? It speaks about what we belong to, how that shapes our identity.

And what shapes our identity always defines the way we live.

See, one of the things you'll notice in this story about the rich man, the rich man, he didn't have a name.

Jesus is telling the story, and he doesn't give him a name. He just refers to him as a rich man. In fact, he's defined in this narrative by everything that he's given himself to.

He's defined by his money, his clothes, the fine things that gate around his house, his gluttony.

And when you build your identity on those things, as you know, this is almost cliché, that's like shifting sand. Things that fade, that wear out, things that rust, that moths can eat, and your identity becomes insecure. So you have to constantly double down. And that's what this picture of this rich man, more food, more money, more and more.

And the rich man dies. It's an interesting part of this story. Something you got to realize when the rich man dies, all of that stuff that defined him was gone. It faded away.

But even in his despair, even with all that stuff, he was so committed to that false identity. He was blind, and he was clinging to it. He was clinging to the identity of the thing that he was. He was acting like he was still the rich man. And he's calling out to Abraham like he's a servant, like, "Yo Abe, get Lazarus to go dip-"

his finger in the water and bring it to me." And Abraham's like, "No, he's still acting like he's in this place." See how you understand yourself and where you think you are, whether it's true or not, rooted in reality or not, it determines everything about what you do, your morals, the moral imperatives, your direction, the trajectory in life. We're so committed to that identity, we can't see it so often. When I lived in Nashville, there was this intersection on Whitebridge Road, a really busy road. And at five o'clock, when you'd be driving down that road and there's traffic was everywhere, there was this guy that stood on the corner every week. I don't know what was going on with him, I don't know what was in his head, but from the best that I could tell, he thought he was standing on the stage of a coliseum. I don't know if he was a rock star or he was a performer that had just finished something, or he was a world leader, or what, but he just sat there and was just like waving like the crowd was cheering to him, and he would bow, and he would walk around and just be like, "Yeah!" He had this huge grin on his face. He was totally nuts, totally nuts, right? But he believed it. And it doesn't matter how I saw him as nuts or whether everybody else saw him as nuts; he believed that was true of him, and it informed everything about him, and for years, he stood on that street corner and did the same thing over and over again. So we have that picture of Lazarus, I mean, of the rich man, rather, we're going to contrast it to this picture of the poor man in our story. And this is a guy that Jesus actually gives him a name, and his name is Lazarus, and that's a Hebrew word, and it means God has helped us. So we have Lazarus, and Jesus is deliberate about giving him this name. It's very deliberate and it's on purpose because you know what, it would have been very easy for Lazarus's identity to be, "I am the poor man. I am the victim. I am the one that shunned. I lay. I'm the one that the dogs licked. Poor me. I am this one that no one has seen. I'm the starving poor beggar." See, it's very easy to fall into the trap that, "Oh, we can find our identity in the wealth and the riches and the things of this world, but we can also find our identity in the tragedies of this world." The things that happened to us, right? "Oh, I'm divorced. I'm just the divorced guy, the divorced woman, or I've just been wounded, or this thing has happened to me." And we let this, our addictions or whatever it is, try to define our lives. But when we look at Lazarus, that's not what Jesus allows in this moment. What Jesus says in this moment, when he's describing Lazarus, he gives him that name; his identity wasn't in his poverty. It wasn't in his

source. Lazarus, God has helped us. His identity was belonging to a God who was fiercely protecting him.

And Lazarus dies and he's carried over, it says, to Abraham's side. Now, anytime you read in the Old Testament, especially, but anytime you read about someone being in the bosom of Abraham or being by Abraham's side, that's a biblical way of saying God has adopted you, has absorbed you into his family. You are now a recipient of his covenant promises, of his covenant blessings. You belong to him. And there he is, adopted into Abraham's family by faith, Lazarus. See what you're seeing in both of these stories, or both of these examples, is the gospel makes our identity a matter of first importance all the time. You will read it throughout the New Testament. Who we are, and the reason it does, is because the gospel knows that who we are determines everything about how we are. And what this passage is telling us, don't miss this, it's saying who we are is always determined by whose we are. Whose we are, what we belong to, who we give ourselves to, or what we give ourselves to. My wife when I first met her, her name was Charlotte Lamply, and I fell in love with her, and we got married. And in that moment, she changed her name to Charlotte Lamply, and she was a servant. In that moment, I became her primary relationship. She became my primary relationship. I belong to her, and she belonged to me. And that would change the trajectory of everything about our lives, how we would live with this exclusive relationship we had. You can't imagine that after we got married, I said after the reception, and we're saying goodbye, I said, Charlotte, that was awesome. You ready to go on your honeymoon? She goes, yeah, but I'm going to go on a date with somebody. Like, no, she wouldn't do that because she belonged to me. And the same way that I'm like, oh, I'm going to go back to my old ways. No, it's not the way it works. We were redefined. Our primary relationship was redefined. And it's the same way with us. What's our most primary relationship? It's with God. You know this, right? It's not a hard question. Our most primary relationship was with God, God, the creator, who determines who we are, what we are, why we are, how long we get to be. And so I love that. He's the one. So as a result, I know this. When I read this parable, I know what I'm about. I want to be about God. So I want to be by Abraham's side. So I'm going to identify with Lazarus. Slow our roll a little bit. Here's a little pro tip about parables and stories in Scripture. They are not written as pep talks. They are not written to be a moral compass for you to how to do the right

thing. Scripture, parables, and scriptures in these biblical stories it's not about finding the rungs on the ladder that we have to climb to self-improvement. Jesus has zero interest in being a first century Tony Robbins. What these stories are from first to last, they are crafted to be mirrors, to show us our need for a savior. Period. And to that end, when you are trying to find, and you're reading a story, and you are trying to find the person with whom you relate to in that narrative, let me help you find the worst person in the story. That's who you were. This story was designed for you to identify with. Find the tax collector. Find the sinner. Find the person in the back of the room that's yelling, crucify him. Because these stories give us an X-ray of our hearts. They shine in and show us the needs of our hearts. So in this instance, in this case, in these stories, the person with whom we are supposed to identify is the rich man. Does that make you uncomfortable? It's designed to. Makes me uncomfortable. It's hard because I don't want to see myself in that way. In fact, it's not that I just don't want to see myself in that way. And I don't want to admit that to myself, and just shut my eyes. Sometimes, actually more often than not, I can't see myself in that way. I don't have the ability to see myself as I really am because my sin is so crafty. It blinds me to the reality of myself. You can't see yourself as you are. You can't. It's like pictured in the blind man or the rich man when he dies.

He's crying out, "Father Abraham." And Abraham's like, "I'm not your father." The rich man can't see it. We're so committed to the delusion in our own sin. But that's where the gospel comes in. That's where the Holy Spirit moves. And the Holy Spirit moves in these profound ways, and it forces us to recognize the sin in our heart. It forces us to see the need that we carry before we can recognize the salvation that we have been offered in Jesus. It forces us to see those things. The Holy Spirit has to open my eyes. It has to stir my heart for this to happen. That for me to see that I am the rich man, and I want to have a life that is defined by comfort. I am the rich man, and I will walk past a thousand times a day the people lying at the gate who are needy. I will miss it, and I won't even know. And guess what? I don't even care half the time. I am the rich man that I will make a caricature of myself to look good to the world, and I will take that all day long rather than insulate myself with wealth and comfortable things. I'll do that rather than think about myself as I really am. I would rather see my church as a club that I can come and just hang with my friends, rather than see as a hospital and a place for

repentance. And if I do see it as a hospital, well, guess what? I get to be a doctor. Nope. I'm on the gurney. This is what Jesus, the tires of Jesus, comes to stir in us. His Holy Spirit and the tires of grace. Hear this. They begin to catch when we see ourselves as we really are. When we can see our need that we are not the hero of the story. That we deserve the rich man's punishment. We deserve the isolation from God. We deserve the thirst. And it matters. We have to see that before we turn our eyes to Jesus. And what do we see when we see Jesus? We see that Jesus came to save the unfaithful. Not the faithful. If I could be faithful, I wouldn't need a Savior.

Jesus came, and His grace comes for us. And it doesn't come for us like it's standing in a circle, on the ninth grade kid standing on the outside looking in, hoping I can be part in to be invited in. That's not the picture. I'm the ninth grade kid, but I'm sprinting in the other direction, chasing everything but Jesus. And when Jesus comes after me, He climbed on that cross

and He took the punishment of the rich man. Why did He do that? Because He picked me. He picked you. He chose you. When did He choose you? Before the foundations of the world. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. When did Jesus pick you? Before that. And He says, "You are mine and I will come for you." And when He climbed on that cross, He took the rich man's punishment. He endured that chasm, that separation, and that isolation from His Father. As He hung on the cross, He cried out, "I am thirsty." The punishment that the rich man deserved. He became nameless, isolated, thirsty. Why? So you wouldn't have to be. So you wouldn't have to be. And upon His resurrection, He gives us His Holy Spirit. And Galatians 4 tells us, "God sent forth His Spirit so that we might receive adoptions as sons." He's saying, "Come in and because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts crying, 'Abba, Father, Abba, Father.'" That is Hebrew for daddy. Daddy, my heart cries out, "Daddy."

And like Lazarus by faith, we are taken to the side of Abraham. We are adopted into God's family. Isaiah 65 says, "We are given a new name, a new identity where we were once isolated. We are now sons and daughters of the King, where we were once building our own kingdoms. We're now part of an eternal kingdom sent out to love others." Man, we get this and we take tastes of this. It's such a hard reality to live in, isn't it? We get it for a minute, and all

of a sudden we wake up, and I'm like, "God, well, who am I? What am I?" But that's why we come to church. That's why we read our Bibles. That's why we pray. That's why we sing worship songs. We do that. We rattle our hearts because we're standing there. When we do that and we come to church and we cry out to God, we're standing outside the circle and we're like, "Am I picked? Am I picked?" That's when God lifts His eyes and He sees us, and we remember He sees us and He passes the ball to our feet and says, "Come on, you're with me. Come back to where you belong."

My friend Jim, that I was telling you about that was my young life leader; he's a pastor

and he lives just north of here, and we're still really close.

About two years ago, he called and he said, "I've been having these weird things with my hand and my neck." I went into the doctor and he did this surgery and all these kind of things, and he said, "They just told me I have ALS, which is Lou Gehrig's disease, and if you know anybody, you don't know what that is. It's basically your body begins to shut down all around you. Every one of your muscles to the way you can't breathe, and then it just takes your life, and it's a terrible, terrible way to go." About a year after that, there was a night of my ordination. I was standing up here and I was getting ready, and I turned around and I looked up here and sitting at the end of the aisle, before the service started, I see a wheelchair sitting there, and it was Jim, and I broke in half crying. I'm like, "You showed. You came again."

I gave him a hug. I've been walking with him for the last year, and on Wednesday, his wife called me

and said, "Jim's dying." He's asked if you would come up and give him last rites. So I went up and I saw his family. We gather around his bed and serve communion to everybody. And as I leaned over Jim, I anointed his head with oil. Here he is, Lord, a lamb of your own flock, a center of your own redeeming. Oh, I was dirty crying. It was this incredible moment.

And after I was done, I was getting ready to leave. Jim looked up, and he still had some energy, and he said, "Would you do me a favor? Would you please

sing at my funeral?" I said, "Of course, man. I'll sing at your funeral. On one condition,

I get to be a candle lighter." And he said, "Okay."

Last night at 645, he died, and I was so sad when I heard because he was a dear friend. But you know what? It was time. He's been set free, and as deep as that sadness goes and that sorrow is, it is a sorrow wrapped in hope. It is a sorrow wrapped in joy. It is a sorrow wrapped in expectation because let me tell you what, I know this about my brother. Years ago, Jesus came and said, "You belong to me, and adopted him and pulled him in." And that led him to live a life. That new identity shaped everything about him. It shaped everything about him, to one day, he turned to me and said, "You belong with me." And he called me in, and that has shaped everything about me and the trajectory of my life. And I promise you this, there's going to come a day. There's going to come a day that I'm going to go to glory where Jim is now, with a healed body. And when I step through those gates, I guarantee you, I'm going to feel a ball hit my feet, and I'll see my brother because I've been adopted. I'm a part of Abraham's family. I've been pulled to his side. For those of you in this room that know Jesus, that is you. For those of you who don't, do you hear God calling you?

Do you see yourself in the mirror? Do you see what God may have for you? The invitation.

Can you feel the ball at your feet? If you hear that, don't push the invitation off.

You are God's people. And may we all live in the realities of our adoption and invite others to do the same. Amen.