

Senior Sermon by Peyton White

Romans 8:14-17; Isaiah 43: 1-4a

May 7, 2017

Good morning, everyone. I have finally made it to my senior year, and surprisingly have survived being a PK throughout the 18 years of my life. (That's a Pastor's Kid, for those of you who don't know!)

Being a Pastor's kid comes with many trials and tribulations, but also some benefits. I can call adults by their first names, I have a key to the church, and I can escape to the office whenever I want. But I have also had to be in more church activities in my lifetime, probably more than all of you combined. I wasn't asked to preach for this morning. No, I was expected to! And people like to put me in a box, not only peers, but teachers as well, assuming I am overly religious, because of my mother's profession.

One particular moment that still comes up in conversations to this day, was when I was in my first Christmas Pageant at our church in Greenwich. I was seven years old. I may have only been a mere angel, but I couldn't wait for the production. As I was about to get on stage, the angel Gabriel hadn't shown up yet. The only person equipped to do the job, was the dear Reverend White. Being a PK was especially hard for me that day, and the pictures of me pouting while mom was glowing say it all!

Being a PK has shaped my life, but so has the fact that I am adopted. July 8th, 2000 was the day I officially left baby house 23 in Moscow, Russia. I have lived in America ever since, and my adoption has contributed to who I am in a multitude of ways. I see things from different perspectives, and handle situations in varying ways. Even though I was adopted at age one and grew up in America, I have always considered myself Russian instead of American. I have taken four years of Russian, practiced some Russian customs, and try to immerse myself in the culture. I do all of this because it is important to me to value my heritage and be proud of it. With all the negative media attention around Russia these days, it has been hard for me to be proud of my home Country, because of the relations with the United States. People are always saying negative things about Russia, not thinking how it will affect me. Although I have not visited Russia since my adoption, it is still a part of me, and it is sad to see what is currently going on over their policies around the world. I plan to study more about that in college.

For children, being adopted is a hard concept to understand, and many have a difficult time with it. The constant need to get affirmation of their adoptive parents' love, the desire to resemble the family, and the living with the knowledge you have other parents out in the world who gave you up. Throughout my eighteen years I have dealt with many of the emotional pains attributed with adoption. Being the only one adopted out of a family with six children hasn't always been a self-esteem booster, especially when you want to fit in. When class discussions turned to which parent you resemble the most, it's not fun to have to lie because you don't feel

like explaining your whole life history. And then there's the getting aggravated when friends complain about hating their parents, and their saying they wished they were adopted, because they don't understand how fortunate they are. But even with all of this, I have gotten to a point in my life where I truly understand how fortunate I am to be living the life I am, and I have no resentment for my birth parents at all. If anything, they are the reason I am alive today, and I thank them every day for giving me the gift of life. But also for giving me the best possible chance to actually live it.

My adoption has been the greatest gift I have been given, and will ever receive. It has made me appreciate life in unimaginable ways, and has also given me a certain innate respect for different cultures and customs. I will be forever thankful to my birth parents for making the selfless decision to put me up for adoption, and to my adoptive parents for giving me a second chance at life.

My life would not be the same if I were living in Moscow, Russia right now. I would be unrecognizable. Even though I spent my first year alive in an orphanage, I could not have asked for a better life. I carry around my Russian heritage with me every day, everywhere I go. Yevgeniya, is my middle name, and was given to me as a first name by my birth mother. Someday I will return to my place of birth, and I will learn all there is to know about my culture. But today I am satisfied with knowing I have a place to call home.

While I am literally adopted, the scripture tells us that we are all adopted as children of God. This may be a hard concept to understand. It is for me. But if we are all adopted as children of God and intimately known as children of God, then no matter where we are from we are all connected and we need each other.

Life in the church helps me understand that idea. For example, the service projects, I have participated in through the churches of which I have been a part, have shown me that no matter where we are from or what our life situations are, that we can all have an impact on one another.

When I was 9, my mother and I gathered care packages, gift cards, and toys, provided by our church in Greenwich. We took a van down to Alabama, to assist those affected by a devastating tornado. Even at my young age, I could understand the suffering felt by those who had literally lost everything. They were just like me.

I have also participated in several breakfast runs (the morning form of the Midnight Run with the homeless and working poor who live on the streets of Manhattan). Those trips are always so meaningful to me because I meet such amazing people throughout them. Seeing poverty so up close and personal, is very upsetting. One time I met a homeless woman named Lisa on the streets of New York City when I was serving food. She told me that she had never planned on living on the streets, but she had lost her job and couldn't pay her rent. I realized this can happen to anyone, and I think it is so important to help others when they are down, because any one of us could easily be next.

In the summer of 2014 I had the opportunity to go to Nicaragua with our WPC group of 15, to build a house for a local family. Even though there was a prominent language barrier, and the only Spanish I knew was *hola*, I connected with the local people immediately. It was difficult at first, not being able to communicate through words, but as the days went on, words weren't even needed. During our time off, Shelby Connor and I, spent hours braiding the hair of the neighborhood girls while they giggled. We made necklaces, colored, and played go fish. The high school boys, with Sonny Kern's help, rigged up a basketball hoop and played endlessly. The work of building a house in extreme heat was one of the most challenging experiences I have ever had but also one of the most rewarding. In six days, fifteen people from our congregation had built a house together for a deserving family. Even though it was hard manual labor, we always had the energy to play with the kids when getting back from the worksite. The experience taught me how important having a community is.

The church communities where my mother has worked and I have attended have always been like second homes to me. I was baptized at North Greenwich Congregational Church. I grew up at Round Hill Community Church in Greenwich, and have spent the last four and a half years here at Wilton Presbyterian Church with you. Numerous people connected to the church have loved me as family and I would like to thank some of them.

At Round Hill Community Church:

Eileen, the former child minister and her two boys Noah and Greyson for always embarking on adventures with me; to MaryAnn and Elena, a mother and daughter who shared their home with me and a similar adoption story; The Women's Group, for creating a safe place for me filled with love; The maintenance man, Steve, for letting me play with his keys to the church; Mrs. Browning, for being my pew buddy; Madison, for being a friend; Helen O'Malley, for prompting me to pursue my dreams. The adults there always engaged me in interesting conversations and assumed that I would one day be a leader.

At Wilton Presbyterian Church:

Sonny and Carol Kern, for taking a special interest in me and inviting me out for dinners; Sally and Anna Carta, for being my pew buddies; Claire Brown, for being a friend; Nicole, Forest, Madelyn and Gaelen, for letting me into your family; Susan Mathews, for sending me a care package when I studied abroad in Australia; Becky Hudspeth, for keeping track of my life; Max Gabrielson, for teaching me and always encouraging me; Shelby Connor, for being someone to talk to; Sandy Shifrin, for being someone to laugh with; Gary Richards, for welcoming me and guiding me along the way; Lee Ann Schneider for marking the important events in my life; Sam and Claudia Halsey for always being interested in what I'm up to; Jane Field, for being my Confirmation mentor. And lastly I would like to thank my mother, for pushing me, enlightening me, teaching me, laughing with me, inspiring me, and loving me.

As I head off to the University of Delaware, I will take what I have learned from the loving communities that have shaped me, and help create that same kind of loving community wherever I go. Thank you for what you have given me.

Amen!