

cause of the utter certainty with which it included them in something larger and more gracious than their own agenda. The speaker was no longer limiting himself to America but was imagining the kingdom of God. This is what the kingdom will look like, he said that afternoon: like white people and black people from Georgia sitting at table together and acting like kin.

This dream was no Freudian disclosure of personal meaning. No, this was a big dream of world transformation, the kind God gives, and when God gives a dream, it is a fearful thing because it always comes to pass. Which is why 40 years ago the preacher said with such emphasis, "knowing that we will be free one day."

In the crucible of black-church

worship, once the preacher leaves off chiding and exhorting, he tremblingly enters the realm of God's own freedom. This is the most powerful part of the sermon because the preacher is doing little more than announcing what God is already doing or has pledged to do. In the "Dream" segment this is precisely what King was declaring but on a scale unparalleled in American history. In this realm, God has the freedom to do such a new thing that, with the possible exception of this one marked dreamer, no one else has even imagined it.

Only after we have listened to the prophet's judgments can we lock arms with one another and embrace his dream. After all these years, his challenge remains the same: Are you ready for a dream this big? ■

be taken into another home where you could have a mother and a father. You needed to have parents who could and would love you unconditionally, for without that kind of love no child can flourish (as, indeed, you have flourished).

So the "natural" connection of parents and children is important, but human beings are not only "natural" but also "historical" beings. I was not your biological father, but after you'd been living with us for a few years—after we'd shared that much history—I had nevertheless become your true father.

How long does that take? Who can say? Probably it only dawns upon us gradually that it is happening or has happened. But at some point it became clear to Mom and me that—without any biological connection at all—you had nevertheless become our son, and we had become your parents. This too is a gift God gives, even if it's not given in the natural, biological way. So adoption goes beyond biology—but also mimics it. When you were adopted you were given not just two people who would care for you, but a new mother and father, from whom you yourself could gradually learn what it means to be part of a family.

Does it make any difference that you're adopted? Well, of course it does. How could it not? It means you have a special history that's a little different from that of many other people. It means, I hope, that as you grow older you will appreciate just how important is the bond of parents with their children and will be able to help others appreciate it as well. And certainly I hope you'll know—with an absolute certainty—that you have received love without condition and are therefore now able to give such love as well.

This is finally a theological point, and I think I'll need one more letter to do it justice. That'll give you something to look forward to!

Love,

Dad

Gilbert Meilaender teaches theology at Valparaiso University. This letter is the fifth in a series.

A LETTER TO DEREK

Being adopted

by Gilbert Meilaender

DEAR DEREK: I've written you four letters already, and it occurs to me that, although I've talked about how we adopted you, I haven't said all that much about what being adopted actually means. We should think together about this before I finish these letters.

It's natural, I think, that you should wonder about that—about why you're adopted, whether it makes any difference, and whether it makes you a different sort of person. Obviously, we don't plan or intend that children should be adopted. We expect that children can be cared for by their biological parents, and usually they are. That's a good thing. Those biological ties are important, because human beings are bodies. We're connected to each other by bonds of kinship and descent, in which a child is a kind of bodily image of the marriage of a man and woman. If we pretended this was not important, we'd be thinking of

ourselves as more like angels—bodiless spirits. But we're not made like that.

Children are a gift God gives parents, and usually this gift turns out to help both parents and children. Parents begin to learn what it means really to love and care for someone else. They learn that their own plans and desires must often be interrupted or even set aside because of the needs of their children. And children learn what it means to have someone love them unconditionally—not because they have certain abilities or talents, but just because parents love their children.

Sometimes this doesn't work out, though. Then we have to remember that we are not just bodies who have to accept whatever happens, but we are also free to step in and try to help when things go wrong. That's what adoption is for, and that's why you are adopted. Your parents just couldn't take care of you, and so you needed to



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