

Family of Christ

A Sermon by Rev. Katherine Schofield

Sunday, September 22, 2019

Families – whew – families are complicated.

Our families love and nurture us...and often they misunderstand us. For some people, thinking about family is mostly comforting, bringing up memories of family dinners, shared work and play, and daily moments of caring. For others, thinking about family is deeply painful. Many of us fall somewhere in between, in our experiences of the messy and complicated lives of parents and siblings, grandparents, aunts and uncles who are human beings – blessed, but flawed.

Family is a complicated thing. And no one knew that like Jesus. Can you imagine the sibling rivalry in his house? How many times did Jesus' brother James have to hear "why can't you be more like Jesus". And Jesus had two dads way before it was cool.

Kidding aside, in Jesus' day the family unit was of vital importance. Families, or "households," were the primary social and economic units of first-century society and were the source of people's identity, security, and support. But Jesus turns the notion of family on its head.

In Mark chapter 3 Jesus is deep in his ministry. He's done a bunch of healing and casting out demons, and he's riled up the religious authorities by speaking some pretty sharp truths about putting compassion above conformity, and now a large crowd is following him everywhere. He returns to his home town and he's greeted by religious authorities who are frightened by this rabble rouser – they spread the rumor that he's possessed by satan --, and a family that is trying to restrain him. Whether they're worried that he's in danger, or just embarrassed that their family member is becoming a public mockery is unclear. What is clear – with no equivocation – is the response that Jesus gives when he's told that his family is looking to speak with him. Jesus says,

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

This is what Jesus does. Just like he flipped those money changers tables in the temple, and came up with that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first" – the same guy who said "the meek shall inherit the earth" has now said -- it's not lineage and blood relationships that make a family, it's love. Love that binds a family together.

Jesus builds his own chosen family.

This is a familiar term in the LGBTQ world that refers to families that are brought together not by blood or tradition but by choice. The people with whom you spend your life not because you're related or obligated, but because you're committed to one another. For some of us, blood

family and chosen family are the same thing. And for others of us, they are not. But here's the exciting thing, regardless: chosen families are profoundly biblical. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are both obsessed with the idea of covenant, the mutual agreement to walk together through life. God covenants with the people, and the people covenant with God. Individuals and families covenant with each other. The traditional biblical family isn't a husband and wife and 2.5 children—it's Ruth and Naomi, two widows who look, in the eyes of society, like they have nothing, but who in fact have everything they need because they have each other and they have God. If we are serious when we say "God is Love", then we also mean that God is alive and present in any family where love is found.

Church, at its best, is chosen family. When we join a community like this, we're saying to each other: Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Like any family, we won't always get it right. In fact, we'll often get it wrong. But the point isn't to be perfect. The point is to be together. And the point is to love. To offer forgiveness. To take off our masks of perfectionism. To let go of our own sense of inadequacy or unlovableness – and encounter one another in vulnerable truth. The point is to learn from one another and be transformed. To let go of life as we know it, for the sake of something bigger than just ourselves. To choose one another, as God has chosen us, all of us, as people worthy of love and honor.

Just now (in our ritual of baptism) we made these promises to Diana – they are the promises we make to every person who becomes part of our church family. We promise to pray for you, to seek the depths of faith with you, to support you and to love you. And we mean that sincerely for every person who becomes part of this church family. So if you need someone to talk to, or if you could use some prayers, or if you're missing family members that are far from you -- reach out. We've already promised that we are here for you, we will be family for you. We also promise to create and maintain a nurturing and challenging environment for all who call this community home. Which means that while we care for one another, sometimes we may push each other to try new things, or seriously consider our blind spots – it's a mark of a healthy family to encourage one another as we grow and change.

One of the main ways we provide challenge and support to one another at Old South is through our Small Group Ministries. This evening we will ask a special blessing upon our small groups. Right now we have 10 small groups that meet regularly throughout the month -- and we may be adding more soon. If you are in a small group ministry (that includes, book groups, drop in lunches, or bible studies), if you've been in a small group before or if you're considering joining a small group would you please stand. Our three choirs also serve as a kind of small group so if you are part of our Festival, Gospel or Handbell Choir would you please stand.

Let us pray...

Spirit of kindness and compassion, we come from different places to this sacred ground of communal caring. We are enriched by the company of each other, and are drawn closer to the heart of love through our relationships. Thank you for the ways in which our small group ministries have blessed the lives of so many in our community, and thank you for helping these groups to grow and flourish. Touch this gathering with tenderness so that we may be refreshed

anew by the grace that encompasses this evening. *Bless these, the small group ministries of Old South Church. May each group serve as a place of connection, support and challenge for all those seeking to grow in faith. Bless each group member with a sense of belonging and the courage to share themselves in truth and vulnerability with the members of their group. Bless our group leaders who wrangle, and prepare, council and encourage – may they also experience spiritual growth and the gifts of life lived in community.* Spirit that glistens in the light, bless this community that shares so generously with their hands and their hearts. Keep us ever mindful of the powerful possibilities of love as we walk through all the seasons of our lives. Amen.