



“Extended Family”

Jeremiah 22:1-18 and Matthew 10:37-42

Rev. Al Bunis

June 26, 2011

Second Sunday after Pentecost

As I began reflecting on today’s text from Matthew...which has a lot to do with family connections...something occurred to me...about this time of year. It occurred to me that this late spring timeframe we’ve just been enjoying...that this is a season for family gatherings.

May and June...are the months when so many family events seem to happen. Just for starters...we have Mother’s Day...and Father’s Day.

But also...this time of year...families gather for other events: like graduations...and weddings...and anniversaries.

And here at Plymouth...in the past few weeks...we’ve have had our own series of events that call for families to gather: we had confirmation...we had an ordination...and we’ve had baptisms on consecutive Sundays.

Yes...family gatherings are certainly in the air. And...as if on cue...last weekend...I was away...doing a family wedding in Virginia...for my niece.

These family gatherings...are...of course...wonderful occasions...a time for celebration of who we are. Being with our families...especially our extended families...these are rare occasions...that give us the opportunity to...revel in our identity...in our heritage.

And I think one of the most beautiful aspects of these family events...is that we don’t have to worry about pretense. We are who we are...we all know each other’s stories...for better and for worse. We all know about each other’s dirty laundry...and that helps us let our hair down a bit.

But...of course...this isn’t the entire story. I also think its fair to say...that family gatherings aren’t always...100% pure bliss. Dare I say that occasionally there can be...a bit of tension.

Now, please don’t think I’m making a judgment about anyone’s family...including my own...but I don’t think I’m going out on a limb...when I say that...family get-togethers can be memorable...not just for positive reasons.

And...of course...this is reflective of the fact...that there are two sides to family life: the wonderful stuff...and the challenges. And both sides are succinctly captured in those wedding vows that I invoked just last weekend: “for better, for worse...in sickness and in health...for richer, for poorer...”

And so...knowing what we know about family relationships...both the ups...and the downs...it is quite interesting...that our text today from the Gospel of Matthew...that it poignantly...starts with...and builds off of...the family dynamic.

Here...we have Christ speaking to the Disciples...at the end of a long discourse...which is often called his "missionary discourse".

He is instructing the Disciples...about their missionary work in spreading the Gospel. It's really like a long sermon...filled with both...exhortation...and warning...about what is ahead for the Disciples.

And today's reading...which is the conclusion to this long discourse...it opens with a blunt comparison...of family relationships...to our relationship with Christ. Christ says to his band of followers:

Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me...

For many of us...these are among the more uncomfortable words in the Gospels. And no less so today than in ancient times...when virtually all of life...revolved around the family.

At first blush...it sounds like Christ is showing a lack of concern...maybe even disdain...for family life...for family relationships. But these words are actually quite mild...when compared to the two verses...that immediately precede them.

In those two verses...Christ says: "I have come to set a man against his father...and a daughter against her mother...and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law." And then he caps it off by saying that "one's foes will be members of one's own family."

Now...I've seen some pretty serious family tension in my day...but I think these words are beyond what most of us imagine. Any way you slice it...this certainly doesn't feel like a Norman Rockwell painting.

And undoubtedly...one reason these words can be so off-putting...is the way our culture thinks about the family unit. In multiple ways...our society lifts up family life...to a sacred level.

The family unit is also often articulated as vital glue that keeps our society intact. Yes...I think we prefer to keep...the Norman Rockwell vision...in our heads when we think of family life.

And yet...here is Jesus...sounding possibly dismissive...about family relationships.

And these words may be extra sensitive here at Plymouth...especially since so much of our growth in recent years has come from young families. And also...consider the fact that we have so many interfaith families. I come from an interfaith family.

And so...maybe it would have been safest to have ignored this part of Matthew...to have skipped over this lesson from today's lectionary.

Well...the good news...and I don't think you'll be surprised to hear me say this...the good news is that there is another way to think about this text. In fact, there is a lot more to say.

To begin with...what Jesus says about the likelihood of divisions...as uncomfortable as it is...it does reflect...to at least some degree...the reality of...both ancient times...and even today.

Christ's words capture some of the intense pressures felt in the very early days...among Christ's followers...as the church was emerging.

There was intense pressure...on the early followers of Christ...not only within the tightly knit communities...and families...that closely adhered to the Israelite faith...but also in the wider Roman Empire...where Christianity was not a legal faith.

And what Jesus had to say was unquestionably controversial...potentially divisive...like his criticism of the hierarchy in the Temple...and some of the then current religious practices...and also his criticism of the Roman overlords.

Christ's words in today's passage...words that warn of tension and division...they probably realistically reflected...the situation confronting those...seeking to spread the faith.

And so maybe Christ...was simply preparing his followers...his Disciples...for the intense difficulty and antipathy ahead. And from what we know about the martyrdom of his early followers...Christ's tone of warning to his Disciples...was realistic indeed.

And yet...even today...in our modern setting...I'm not so sure these words can be seen as simply...hyperbole. There are still parts of the world...in fact...many of them...where divisions over faith...tear communities and families apart.

We might sometimes miss this because of where we live. We are so fortunate to live in a nation that celebrates religious differences...even within families. And I can tell you...from my own family experience...growing up in an interfaith household...that I am so thankful for this.

With the 4th of July coming next week...let me just say how thankful I am to God...for the blessing of American pluralism...and welcoming difference and equality in this country.

But now...focusing back on Christ's words in Matthew...whatever we think about this text...whether we think Christ really expected families to feel such stress...or if we think there might have been a bit of hyperbole here...either way...I don't think there can be any realistic doubt that Christ...was most supportive of the notion of family...including his own family.

Just for starters...at a most general level...consider the 10 Commandments...the centerpiece of the Hebrew Scriptures...that Christ quoted so often. Aren't we clearly told to "honor thy mother and father"? As a devout follower of the commandments, Christ would have seen this as paramount...a requirement.

And doesn't Christ also so often speak of our relationship with God...as being akin to a parent/child relationship. And on a more personal level...sounding very family oriented...Christ calls his own father...he calls God "Abba" ...or Daddy.

And...didn't Christ's own brother join his movement? And his mother...she was there with him...literally until the end. In fact, at the end of the Gospel of John, Jesus...just before dying...tells one of his Disciples...that Christ's own mother...was now this Disciple's mother...expanding the meaning of family.

No...I don't think there is any doubt that family was important to Christ. No...I don't think Christ was trying to tear down the family. I think it is literally the opposite...I think he was trying to extend it.

As we continue in our reading...we begin to see a change of tone...moving from warning...to an openness...a welcoming mentality...a feeling of hospitality.

Christ says: "Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me...and whoever welcomes me, welcomes the one who sent me." This is such a wonderfully open and expansive vision for Christian hospitality. When we welcome Christ's followers...we welcome...not only Christ...but also God.

For those of you who remember your algebra...and for those of you who don't...there is something called the "transitive property"...which goes like this: If $A=B$...and $B=C$...then $A=C$.

Perhaps we can re-label Christ's wonderfully open pronouncement here...as the "transitive property of Christian welcoming." If we welcome those coming in Christ's name...we welcome Christ...and if we welcome Christ...we also welcome God.

Now that's pretty good incentive to be welcoming.

Here we see...through the simple act of welcoming...we extend our families...even if simply by giving...as Christ says... "a cup of cold water to one of these little ones....in the name of a disciple."

This is a vision for a new family. And this expansive...and inclusive view...is at the core of what Christianity was supposed to be from the very beginning.

Christianity was arguably the first faith...literally premised on...transcending ethnic distinctions...transcending all distinctions. Paul says it beautifully: "In Christ...there is no longer...Jew nor Greek...male nor female..."

We often talk about Plymouth as a church home...as a church family. And what we see here today is exactly that...a vision for extending family.

And there is nothing in this passage today...that supersedes our natural families. This new Christian family...is certainly not meant to replace the old family. No...again...it literally does the opposite. Our church family...is meant to support our family life.

And so...isn't it fitting...that today...we baptized Teddy.

For me...it was a special baptism...because it was my first. One of the things I've always loved about baptism...is that it is precisely about...welcoming...into our new...and extended...family. Baptism...is one of the principal means by which the church...embraces the other...into our fold.

In fact, one can argue....that the importance of this sacrament...is evidenced by the fact that...baptism is literally...at the beginning...and the end of Christ's ministry. Christ began his own ministry...only after being baptized by John the Baptist.

And then...Christ's last instructions to his disciples...in the resurrection...at the very end of the Gospel of Matthew...are to "go and baptize...in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

And these are the exact words that virtually all ministers use in baptisms. For the first time today...I was able to baptize in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit...to welcome Teddy into our extended family...in the name of...

And just think about...the promises we all make in our baptism liturgy here at Plymouth...look at how explicitly...we try to extend our family.

Today...Jim and Amelia...have made a series of vows...but they have not done this alone.

Teddy's Godparents...Eloise and Andrew...they joined Jim and Amelia...in simultaneously reciting their vows...and in the process...they are beautifully sharing the responsibility for these vows.

And in the baptismal covenant...that we all say together...we all promise...all of us...our support in the raising of Teddy...until the time when he is ready for his own confirmation.

We all promise to tell him the story of the Bible...about Abraham and Sarah...on down to Jesus Christ. We all pledge...with God's help...to create...as the words say: "a nurturing environment for this child...and all of our children."

And so...yes...this sacrament of baptism...it is far more than a ritual. It is a time when we promise to support each other...and our families. And in the act of promising...we

Plymouth Church
Sermon June 26, 2011, Rev. Al Bunis

welcome a new addition to our community...a new friend...and little brother...in the name of Christ.

And according to this “transitive property of Christian welcoming”...we are also...simultaneously welcoming Christ and God into our midst.

Yes...in today’s community act of baptism...we are all reminding ourselves...that in this Christian journey...we are not alone. We are all brothers and sisters in Christ...and with Christ.

Amen.

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