

The Second Sunday after Pentecost “Who’s your family?”
June 26, 2011

“ . . . whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple – truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward.” (Mt 10:42)

It is hard for us to listen to this morning’s reading from Genesis. We can hardly imagine a God who would ask a man to sacrifice his son. Or a man who would believe that such a thing was asked of him. This story, often called, “The sacrifice of Isaac”, is very much a valued part of the story of the Jewish people. It shows a man who is willing to give up everything for a God who he believes demands it. Early on, Jewish Christians connected this story to the story of Jesus’ own death and resurrection.

There is a children’s book, designed for Early Readers, called “*Are you my Mother?*” In it, a baby bird falls from its nest and spends the rest of the book looking for its mother who is eventually found. The book expresses a deep longing and need inside of all humans, and many other animals as well – the need to know one’s parents and family and be with them for nurture, comfort, strength, and ultimately growth and development into full adult creatures. We all have a need for family in some form or another.

All of the gospels give indications that being a member of Jesus’ family had its own particular stresses. At a young age on a trip to Jerusalem, his parents discover that he is missing, only to be found in the temple doing “my father’s” business. Already, he defines his family differently. Certainly he challenged their ability to understand when he followed John the Baptist and then went into the wilderness and came out a preacher. In the verses just prior to today’s Gospel, Jesus says some very strong things about family:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For 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 ones’ foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me . . . Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 10:34-37)

And then the passage continues with our reading: “*Whoever welcomes you, welcomes me and so on . . .*”

To understand Matthew’s use of these sayings of Jesus (and indeed to understand all of chapter 10), we need to remember the context. It is approximately 85 AD. The temple was destroyed in 70. The Jewish communities have dispersed in various parts of the Middle East and are re-forming themselves. Christianity is breaking out of the Jewish tradition with its own identity.

The Jewish family which is far more than nuclear, but includes many, many relatives and all of the members of one's household (servants and other workers), blood-related or not, is being rent asunder by religious disagreements. Matthew wants to encourage the disciples that the cost of this tremendous loss, the heartbreaking breakdown of their family loyalties, is worth it. Jesus says that God's mission is not about keeping the family together at all costs. Peace in the family cannot be his first priority. In the 12th chapter of Matthew he redefines his family: "*Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" (12:50) The mission of God about something else – something as simple as welcome and a gift of a cup of cold water.

The American family has been a major topic of public and political conversation for as long as I can remember. In 1970 when I first began working in a day care center, I remember the strong fears of folks about what day care would do to children and families. The 70's saw the acceptance of "no-fault" divorce, a change that was designed to allow folks to part without destroying each other with accusations. That happened, of course, and the divorce rate rose dramatically. Today, one in two marriages ends in divorce. Some say that the increase in divorce has precipitated a breakdown in families, large numbers of unloved children who have become poor and are in jails, and a general downturn in the social fabric of American life.

All of that suggests pretty linear thinking – that is, that one thing necessarily leads to another. Our political response is often to try to control the outcome by manipulating the rules to make divorce more difficult. Added to that conversation is the whole subject of marriage between folks of the same gender and the marked increase in families that have only one parent. I certainly believe that marriage is a lifelong commitment and that children need two parents who love them and each other. I wonder about changing laws when it is hearts that need to be changed. I have seen enough in life to know that good marriages cannot be enforced. They are taught, developed, learned and formed in the crucible of love. Family is more than marriage. It is a multiplicity of relationships.

I believe that we have a lot in common with our first century Jewish and Christian brothers and sisters whose lives were in the midst of social and political upheaval. We, too, are in a major period of transition in human life. Our notion of who is family is changing rapidly, as biological families no longer live together for life, as people move around the country and the world, as marriages are re-formed, as gender identities are made clearer and people choose their partners. Children are adopted, born, raised in a variety of contexts. Religion sometimes is the cause of disagreement among families. More often today I see money, politics, self-centeredness, rebellion, and lack of love as sources of the breakdown.

And so we come back to Abraham and his family. You will remember that Isaac is the child that he and Sarah so longed for and finally were given. Through Isaac, Abraham is assured of the continuation of his own life beyond the grave – that was the significance of having a son. His

willingness to sacrifice his son (a very ancient practice for an earlier time) tells us that he knew that his child belonged to God – not to him. Our children are gifts that we get to care for, shepherd through life, but ultimately they belong to the one from whom they came – Divine Love. Further, at a deeper level, the story is about Abraham’s willingness to give up himself, for that is what he believed he would be doing. The story is not about a desire to kill a child but a willingness to as Jesus says, thousands of years later, “to lose your life that you will find it”. When we hang on to, cling to, possess, we are not living in the Divine realm of love, which Jesus calls the kingdom. Abraham was willing to give up his life and therefore he gained much more.

Jesus offers us and the whole world such a different path. It is one that is not easy and may cause dissension, but it is one that ultimately will bring life, abundant life to all. Jesus gives us an incredible gift. It is the inclusive gift of each other. He gives us a new family, one that will last forever, that includes everyone who walks through our doors, or who we encounter in our lives. It is a gift that can be shared through the simple welcome and offering of a cup of cold water to one who is thirsty.

The sword that Jesus wields is the sword of a skilled surgeon, designed to cut out that which is not needed and get to the essence of our life in God: we all need each other. We all need to be welcomed. We all need our thirst assuaged. It is in embracing and serving one another in all our diversity of circumstances that we come to know and live as the family of God.

Let us drink deeply of this gift and pass it on!

Amen.

Patricia Rome Robertson+
Parish of St. Mary and St. Jude
Northeast Harbor, Maine