

GOD'S GIFT OF FAMILY
Rev. Gary Magarrell November 15, 2009

Today is November 15th, not only the middle of the month but the second last Sunday in the old liturgical year. Next Sunday we celebrate Christ the King Sunday, the final service in the 2009 liturgical year which began with Advent Sunday in 2008. Then we move into the new liturgical year 2010 on Advent 1 when once again we travel steadily to Bethlehem and the celebration of Christ's birth.

This Sunday I have titled my sermon God's Gift of Family. From time to time we need to reflect on the effect of others around us in our development as a human being and also as a person of faith.

This has been brought home to me even more by the celebration of my older sister's 70th birthday this weekend. When I spoke to her in Brighton about what she planned to do to honour this significant achievement, she said nothing except she and her husband and a daughter were going on a cruise in October.

I stated this was great but also I wanted to celebrate this milestone event. Why not host a birthday dinner at my home on Saturday the 14th and sent out invitations to family members only. To my great surprise and satisfaction, I first heard from my sister in Vancouver who said she and her partner would be in attendance.

Then I heard from my brother and sister in law in Winnipeg that they would be arriving for the celebration as well. My sister's daughter, son and families then planned to be here from Kingston and North Bay. And so the planning was on re: menu, enough chairs and tables, timing, etc. What a nice problem!

Family who care for you and nurture you and love you for who you are; family who have seen you through good times and bad; family who have seen you grow and develop and stick with you in spite of difficult times as well as the good.

We are very fortunate in my family as we have written extensive family histories on both sides of the family. The authors of these, including my mother, have given a great gift to us and to future generations of the family.

Family has very different definitions to many people whose experience with family may not reflect the same good opportunities. Today, people are free to choose various groupings of people for their family. We all know individuals who have no family left and feel left out of the experience of those around them

I have a friend who has so much difficulty with Christmas celebrations as these holiday family rituals force her to reflect on her own circumstances and lack of a family. The kindness of others over the holiday period causes her to feel empty and lonely so she tries not get involved in any intimate Christmas events.

Today, there remain bitter fights between groups concerning the nature of family, marriage, divorce and adoption. The nature and structure of the family does not have any one cookie cutter definition with each group pushing for their concept and belief. The reality is that the old television show Father Knows Best picture of the American family does not apply well today even if we wish it did.

All of us need to feel we are a part of a family grouping that loves us unconditionally and accepts us for who we are. These groupings can vary enormously and still be a source of comfort and strength to us.

In reality, we are all a part of numerous families apart from our unit of mom and dad and siblings. If we are working, our colleagues form a unit which is important and often fulfilling for us. We arrive at a new place of employment and before long we are part of the family of workers. Workplace can be a real mixture of people from all over the globe and yet we band together around the common purpose of our work life.

In our Christian life, we decide on a congregation to join and to share in its worship life as well as its activities. Before long we have created bonds with people we have met in worship together. These bonds may develop into friendship beyond the congregation. We take on responsibility along with others for the welfare of the congregation and its members and activities.

Then we are also member of our church denomination, in this case the United Church of Canada which formed in 1925 with the coming together of the Methodists, most of the Presbyterians, the Congregationalists and the Union churches formed across the prairies. Since 1925, the Evangelical United Brethren have joined as well. So we are a part of the United Church family.

As was illustrated in the children's message, Christians are also a part of a faith movement which today is made up of some 2.1 billion people in all countries of the world. We are aware that within this faith community are numerous denominations and ways of worship. As any family, we are not all alike nor do we think the same way.

However, common to all of us is our commitment to a Creator God who has revealed himself most clearly through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

So as a family of believers, we are drawn together by our desire to worship and give praise. What form our worship takes is not as important as our common need to give thanks to a loving and forgiving God.

The early church leaders such as Peter and Paul continually fought against the human tendency to exclude people and our desire to assume special privilege for our group. God's family is one family. God is the creator of all and God has concern and love for all his creation. If this is how our God thinks, why do we so easily and willingly exclude others in our lives?

The early church was made up of people from all walks of life, language groups, social status, slave and free, Jew and Gentile. Each person in those early local congregations had heard the story of Christ and had responded to the call to follow him. Instinctively they knew they could not follow Christ on their own. They needed the faith of others around them to learn and to grow. Community worship enabled them to praise God and to maintain their faith in the face of pressure by their society to not do so.

Peter, Paul and other leaders would tell their story of their own faith journey. For those who believed God only accepted good men and women who had lived an exemplary life, they would speak of their rocky road to faith. Peter would declare how he had denied Christ three times out of fear when Jesus was arrested. He also spoke of his having to stretch when called him to baptize Cornelius a Gentile. You remember in a dream he was instructed to eat what was before him. I can not do so he exclaimed as these meats are unclean. How can you say what I have created is unclean was the question to him from God. Who are you to exclude others when I have brought them to the faith? Peter learned that this new Gospel faith was for all men and women.

Paul would speak of his zeal for God and his rigid following of the Judaic laws. He had been responsible for rounding up Christians and had stood there when Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was stoned to death. He burned with passion to eliminate this new sect known as Christians. But God called him and Paul had to face the fact that all he had hated he now was to love. When someone cried that God could never forgive their sins, Paul would use his personal example. All are worthy to receive the love of God which can and will bring radical change to a life.

We are studying the Book of Acts in our bible study. Acts was written by Luke who had written the Gospel of Luke. In a sense Acts is volume two. In his Gospel, he told the story of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Son of God, his teachings and his giving of his life for all. The death and resurrection of Christ was fundamental to the belief in who Jesus was and is.

Acts then speaks of the task of the family of believers to go out into the world and proclaim the Gospel of Christ. You will recall that Jesus did not write a book or a letter as far as we know. Rather he had a group of followers who were to be witnesses to his life, his teachings and faith.

Acts chronicles how the church began after Christ was no longer physically present. It unfolds as the apostles realize their gargantuan task to bring this message to the world. What they did was to witness to what they had experienced and to show in their own lives the radical change brought about because they had been by confronted this man Jesus.

Also, they quickly realized that the Christian life is a call to community and so established congregations and kept in touch with them as they grew and developed.

Our faith family today is tasked with the same commission – to witness to what we know and to create a safe and welcoming environment for believers new and old to learn more of Christ and to worship together as a family of faith.

Today I spoke of the 2.1 billion people who proclaim them selves as Christians. We share the world with many other faith groups. As an example, there are 1.5 billion Moslems, 1.1billion unbelievers and non religious, 900 million Hindus, 376 million Buddhists, 394 million Chinese ancestor worshippers, 23 million Sikhs, 14 million Jews, etc.

So as well as our faith family, we are part of the family of men and women who inhabit this earth. We behave on earth as a cooperative family at times; however, more often we act as a dysfunctional family. We are all in this together whether we appreciate this or not.

Looking at our Christian family, we know that Christians are under threat and persecution in many parts of the world. Our very act of proclaiming our faith and witnessing to what we have experienced is unacceptable to many. We can not cease as Christians to speak of faith to others anymore than could the early apostles who in spite of facing persecution, ridicule and death could not keep what they knew to themselves.

We should never apologize for the faith we have or the Lord we follow.

Thus we celebrate the family of the church, our denomination which is part of this family and our congregation where we gather to worship, study, gain strength and to celebrate the wonder of God.

Whatever our personal experience has been of family, we know that God has never excluded us from his family even though we often had strayed far from his teachings. God never gives up on us and we should not give up on God.

Lo I am with you always, even to the ends of the earth, says the Lord. Amen