July 7, 2019

Communion Sunday

Sermon For Richland Presbyterian Church, Richland. MI

Reading: Psalm 68:1-10, (v6, God sets the lonely in families…)

Reading: Matthew 12:46-50 (v48, Who is My mother and who are My brothers…)

Communion Reading: John 17: 20-23 (v21, …that all of them may be one…)

Hymns: Jesus Thou Joy

I Come With Joy

God Bless America

I am still in a 4th of July mode, asking myself what it means to be an American, what it means to be part of the “American Tribe”, or clan or people-group. I think, and this is a personal opinion, this question is at the very center of our current political angers concerning immigration and border security. I am not sure I have an answer but I do have the question.

Two children are puzzling or arguing about their relative place in the scheme of things. One says, My father is bigger than your father. The other returns, Oh Yah? My mother wears combat boots! The challenge is not about who can beat up whom, but rather where do I belong? Where am I most secure?

What if the children were arguing God, or church, or denomination? We are celebrating the Sacrament of Communion today. Some of the more formal denominations refer to this Sacrament as the Eucharist. Our Roman Catholic friends refer to this as The Mass. We Presbyterians, for the most part, call it Communion. What does it mean for us as we sit down together for Communion?

I am suggestion these three questions are related.

In the beginning God created Adam. God immediately understood Adam was lonely. There was no one like Adam, except God in a profound generic way (Adam was created in the Image of God and was brought to life by the breath or Spirit of God). Adam wasn’t alone, but God somehow wasn’t enough, and so God created Eve, one like Adam, one in the Image of God, one with the Spirit or breath of God to bring forth life. Adam was no longer alone, no longer lonely. God created helpers to each other and in a very real sense, God created a family. “God sets the lonely in families”

Consider Noah. He of all the people on the earth at the time was found righteous. So, God saved Noah but not alone. God saved Noah, Noah’s wife, Noah’s sons (it appears Noah didn’t have any daughters) and the wives of Noah’s sons. God saved the family, and whatever family traditions and ceremonies and culture, and religious faith which made them a family.

Later in history, God chose Abram/Abraham to carry the hope of Salvation, God’s Covenantal Promise into the whole world, into the future. But it wasn’t Abraham alone, it was Abraham, and Sarai/Sarah, and nephew Lot and all the household staff and servants that made them a family. God led them into a foreign unknown land where they found themselves united to each other by common language, customs, family traditions, spiritual faith. They were a family, united as a family, bound together as a family, called by God as a family. (Are you seeing a pattern here? Are you seeing a connection to the opening questions I was puzzling?)

Things got kind of messed up. Lot broke up the family to some degree. The children of Isaac, Abraham’s son, broke up the family. Jacob created his own problems, fled home and found himself, at God’s Providence, in a new family with his devious uncle Laban. Perhaps in God’s intention to create a new family, Jacob got married, twice over, and accepted two concubines, not necessarily with God’s endorsement of plural marriage, but at least with God’s intention of creating a new family, which would become the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The Children of Israel shared a common language, a common family tradition, a common religious faith, a common purpose of carrying God’s Covenant of Hope into all the world and into the future.

Jump again in history. Moses was to lead the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. But before God and Moses did that, God first provided Moses a family of his own, the daughter of Jethro in the desert. Then after the Plagues, God led Moses as Moses led the Children of Israel, the Family chosen by God. In the desert wanderings, God through Moses was restoring the Family of God, restoring traditions, culture, common holidays, common shared culture, common faith in the Lord God Almighty.

One can read the Judges and Prophets as a history of how God was shepherding and corralling, and re-gathering God’s Chosen Family. Mess up, get lost, wander around a bit, be lonely for what was/is important, look for kindred, be gathered in and restored to the Family. God sets not only the lonely, but all of God’s loved ones in family where there is a shared language of sorts, a shared culture of sorts, a shared way of thinking and doing, a shared spiritual and religious faith. (The Parable of the Prodigal Son would be most appropriate here.)

The Old Testament understanding of Family was always too small. God’s intentions were always of a greater scope. In the teachings of Jesus the greater intention of God was being restated. For several years, perhaps, Jesus has been away from home, preaching and teaching and touring Judea and Galilee and Samaria. His mother and brothers and sisters are deeply concerned about his health and security. They arrive where Jesus is teaching a great crowd. They send in word, asking Him to step outside so they might persuade him to come home back to Nazareth. Jesus asks that profound and misunderstood question, who is My family. God’s family, the family of Jesus is…those who share a common repentance and faith, a common Hope in the Cross, a common language about faith and life in general, a way of being righteous, a common culture, a way of doing things, both church and secular. It not becoming and being identical but at its very foundation it is what is shared in common.

The Faith history I have been tracing is understood to be God’s establishing the Church (Capital C). It has been seen as God at work gathering God’s people into on great diverse family within a shared family, trimming and pruning, grafting and ingrafting, growing the tree, or the vine, or the Church. The True Chosen Family, the True Children of Abraham, are those who have, this side of the Crucifixion and Resurrection and Ascension, received Christ Jesus Lord and Savior. We are family.

In all of our diversity, we share a common faith, a common language about faith and God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We share customs (witness the Table to which we will be sitting in a moment), a common understanding at least in general terms about what is right and wrong (witness our acceptance of the Ten Commandments, the Greatest Commandment, and the Second Greatest). When the first Christians accepted Jesus they found themselves outside the society and often their family. God immediately placed these converts into a new family, a congregation, a church. The lonely were found and placed in family. And so too us.

What does it mean to be an American? Where is my place in the world, where do I, where do those arguing children find security and safety and belonging? When we sit at Table what do we share in Communion? The Lonely are placed in family; Who are my family?

Throughout most of my adult life, through the growing years of our children, we found ourselves apart at distance from our birth families, parents, grandparents, brothers and sister, aunt and uncles. For the first 6 years or so of our marriage, Margaret and I found ourselves living outside of the States. Living in Italy and Germany on Military bases. We found family in God’s Family, in a local Military Chapel, wherever we were. Our children found grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, in the various congregations I served along the way. When lonely God connected me with Margaret. When we were lonely we were connected to church. When our children found themselves alone, we found family in church.

Why do we become concerned when one of our number becomes ill or hospitalized? Why do we b ring forth best efforts when one of our number gets married? Why do we put on funeral luncheons? Why do we visit the sick in hospital? Why do we celebrate our various talents and successes? Why do we worry about those we have been missing seeing in church or around anywhere else? Why do we set up a Sunday School and bring up our children for a Children’s Sermon? Why do we send our youth on missions projects? Why do we share at a pot luck meal? Why?

I think out response informs all three of the opening questions. Most directly it helps me anyway to reflect on Who This family is here in Richland, and perhaps why we were drawn to it when we moved here.

Amen

Homily before the Sacrament of Communion

Scripture tells us that it was the annual custom of Joseph the Carpenter and husband of Mary of Nazareth to take his family to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. Moses had established the Passover as a family celebration and memorial of God leading the Children of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. As families they were to gather. As families they were to remember. As families they were to rehearse the history of what God had done and continued to do for God’s Chosen Family. As family they were to share their celebration with family.

Joseph and the family, father, mother, 4 brothers (including Jesus) and 2 or 3 sisters, and others, would trek to Jerusalem. Joseph would purchase the Sacrificial Lamb, present it in the Temple at the Altar to the priest. Later Joseph would bring the cooked lamb back for the Passover meal…with family. Every Year.

After Joseph died, whenever that was, Jesus, the oldest son, assumed the role of head of the family. Jesus would lead his mother and brothers and sisters to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Jesus would purchase the Lamb. Jesus would present it to the priest. Jesus would bring the prepared lamb back for the family feast. Jesus would preside at table. Every year. And I think including the three years of Jesus’ ministry.

At the Last Supper, Jesus was gathered there with the Disciples, but also his birth family, and perhaps the families of the Disciples, certainly part of the family of James and John the sons of Zebedee. The men would sit in one room, the women in another. The liturgy of the Passover, whatever it was, would be followed and Jesus would preside.

We gather here. We are brought here, by the Holy Spirit. By the Spirit we are bound one to another. Here we are the family. Jesus presides, just as He presided every year as taught by Joseph.

He would take the bread, offer thanks to God for the fruit of the land that brought forth the grain to bake into bread. And then he would forever change the liturgy, This is my body broken for you. He would take the cup of reddish wine and offer thanks, Blessed are You Lord of the Universe Who brings for the fruit of the earth, the wine. And then Jesus would again forever change the liturgy, This is the Blood of the New Covenant, This is My Blood shed for the forgiveness of sins.

These are the Gifts of God for the People of God, for the Family of God.