

Family, eh?

Can you imagine the gall of James and John? They're walking along the road with the other 10 disciples and Jesus. They have been arguing amongst themselves, that is James and John have been arguing, as to who would be granted to sit at the right hand of God and who would sit at the left.

They are making a MASSIVE assumption that it will be one of them given that coveted spot, which would actually belong to Jesus. THEN they want to know which one is more important than the other. Yikes. THEN they have the unmitigated gall to go to Jesus and demand whatever they ask for. Not even a please. I know how MY DAD would have received a request like that...

Jesus challenges them. "Can you drink with the same cup that I use?" They say they can. "Are you baptised with the same baptism I received?" They agree that they can. He then tells them that it's not his decision as to who gets to sit where. That's defined as "it is for those for whom it has been prepared."

If you think this is humorous in Mark's gospel, in Matthew's their MOM corners Jesus and asks the same thing. Seriously, it's flabbergasting! (Matthew 20.20-27, NRSV) The conversation is nearly identical and highlights the significance of one phrase in particular "you do not know what you are asking" (Mark 5.38 & Matthew 20.22, NRSV)

They are so interested in who is more important that they have forgotten Jesus' teachings altogether.

Jesus reminds them in his usual "cryptic" fashion. He says "but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

Mark 10.43-45, NRSV

The dictionary defines family in one of three ways:

Noun - 1. a group of one or more parents and their children living together as a unit. 2. all the descendants of a common ancestor.

Adjective - designed to be suitable for children as well as adults.

"a family newspaper"

I would say, in my humble opinion, that this definition is substandard. It speaks only of biological families. I would assume that everyone here has a biological family. Would that be a true thing to say?

What about a married couple without children? Are they a family?

What about a single person without children? Are they a family?

I have a few very close friends that I consider family. We are not related by blood, yet have a very close familial relationship. The key to that is "relationship", just as it was for Jesus. At different times in the Gospel, Jesus refers to his disciples as friends. And yet, they eventually grew into a family.

They ate together, worked together, lived together, and learned from each other. And just like a biological family, at times they disagreed. Just think of how the disciples treated Thomas on the day he had missed Jesus' appearing to them after the resurrection?

Think about Cain and Abel. Think about Abraham and Sarah. Examples of families of biology and marriage.

The characters of the bible are not written as perfect people. They were written as flawed characters, including Jesus himself.

Yet at the centre of all of it is one basic premise. In order to do God's work, one must be in relationship with those who surround them. If the disciples were not in relationship with Jesus, no matter how charismatic he was, they would not have stayed when times were tough.

Remember, James and John were fishing with their Dad when Jesus rolled up and said "Follow me". They got out of the boat, left their Dad behind and followed Jesus.

Now yes, I know, most of the scattered and hid when Jesus was arrested. Don't judge them. Remember, they were human, just like we are. And it's easy to sit back and critique after the fact, but what about at that time?

I don't know about you, but I'm not certain what I would have done.

Jesus tells his disciples many times in his teachings that they cannot be served until they learn how to serve. They cannot be first, until they learn how to be last. His last message, at the "last supper" when he washed their feet, was to teach them that they must first, learn to wash the feet of others.

Jesus was wholly divine and wholly human. If you want to help someone who is starving, first you feed them. If you want to help someone who is cold, first you give them a blanket or warm coat, or socks, etc. Once they have their human needs met and their humanity acknowledged; then and ONLY THEN can you talk about the transformative work of Jesus.

Because then and only have you done this most important work.
Then and only then have you been an example of this transformative work.
Then and only then have you shone a light on the darkness of hunger, poverty and invisibility.

Today we were supposed to be welcoming Baby Claire to the family of God. We were not going to introduce her to God. She's known God since she was inside her mother. When she was being knit together, God was with her. When she was born God's ruah entered her as she took her first breath and it was then she was known as a beloved child of God.

Just like the rest of you. And just like me. And just like the homeless woman who is trying to protect herself from the cold. And just like the people of Iqaluit are in need of potable and safe water.

The thing with families, whether they are by birth or by design, is that they will argue. They will disagree. Some of those disagreements can be settled through conversation and apology. Some are settled with space between those who are arguing. Some don't get settled. Yet there remains a connection, and a relationship.

Families are messy. They can be loud. They can be dysfunctional, they can be frustrating. And families can be lifelines, they can be listening ears and arms open wide to embrace and protect.

Families, whether they are biological or chosen, need two things to function: They need relationship. And they need love.

Jesus and the disciples are a family...Jesus as the "father figure" or "older brother" teaching right from wrong. Advice that is sometimes taken, often misunderstood, and even with mistakes, the relationship continues, and so does the love.

The day Jesus appeared to the disciples when Thomas wasn't there is where Thomas became known as The Doubter. The little speech he makes was not intended for Jesus, it was intended for the other disciples. I don't know that this is true, but I see Thomas as the loner in the pack. The one who caught the joke a few seconds after the others...the one who was awkward and shy and often teased. So when he says he needs proof, that was not intended for Jesus, it was for the others.

I imagine their telling of it went like this..."Hey Thomas, guess who WE saw?"

Thomas, "I have no idea, who did you see?"

Disciples, "We saw Jesus."

Thomas. "No way!"

Disciples, "Yah-Weh" (groan) [You know, like Yaweh? No?]

Thomas, "I don't believe you. I need to see Jesus before me, with his wounds before I'll believe you."

Jesus, "Hey Thomas, you rang?"

Cain and Abel were twins, with Cain the firstborn. He was a tiller of the Earth and Abel was a herdsman or Shepherd. Cain was hot-tempered and was constantly comparing himself to his brother. Abel was more even-tempered and tried to live a quiet life. Cain challenged his brother to see who God favoured more in the giving of a sacrifice. Cain offered fresh fruit and grain while Abel offered the first fatling. God praised Abel's offering but not Cain's.

Cain was crestfallen and God told him if he held his temper and learned to give from a place of grace instead of challenge, he too, would receive God's favour. That was all too much work for Cain, and so he lured his brother into the woods and killed him with a stone.

Abraham and Sarah were first known as Abram and Sarai. They fled Canan for Egypt during a time of famine. Abram was afraid that the Egyptians would kill him in order to take Sarai so he said she was his sister. Sarai was taken into Pharaoh's harem and Abram was given great wealth. Nice guy.

Later on, after they have fled Egypt, angels come to visit Abram. He sends for a fatted calf and they guys sit around while Sarai is busy in the kitchen. Sarai overhears that Abram will be made a father of many nations and his ancestors will be as multitudinous as the stars in the sky. She hears that she will give birth...at the ripe old age of 90. And she laughs.

And so their names are changed from Abram (exalted father) to Abraham (father of multitudes) and Sarai (princess) to Sarah, which also means princess. When she was caught laughing, she denied she laughed, most likely out of fear. Consequently, the name of her first son was Isaac, which means "to laugh".

Families can take many forms. Some have families by birth or by blood. Others have families by choice or condition. Whatever way you define family, please know you are part of a larger family...in fact, more than one larger family.

The Congregation of Knox United is a family. The Congregation of Christ Church is a family. The Shared Ministry of Knox United, Christ Church and our Online Community is a family. The worldwide collection of believers or followers of Jesus are also a family.

And just like any family we connect by commonality, by relationship and most importantly by love. We don't always have to like each other, yet we are commanded to love.

In the words of the Prophets Lennon and McCartney, "All you need is love!"
Amen

Sermon for Pentecost 21 - 17 October 2021

Mark 10.35-45

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Incumbent
Elk Valley Shared Ministry including
Knox United Church & Christ Church Anglican