

The Body of Christ, Part 1: One Big (Happy) Family

Genesis 17:1-9

1 Corinthians 12:1-11

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green

Second Sunday after Epiphany

January 20, 2013

I wish I had a nickle for every time I've heard the phrase "church family" in my 23 years of ordained ministry. Actually, if I had a quarter for every time I've heard the phrase, it might be enough to fix our sanctuary building!

The notion of God's people as "family" dates all the way back to the book of Genesis, to this morning's Old Testament reading. God promised Abram that he would become the father of multitudes. And so he did. And we are the multitudes. Jews, Christians and Muslims all trace our spiritual ancestry back to Abraham. We speak of Father Abraham. We call ourselves children of Abraham. We belong to the Abrahamic family of faiths.

Our family identity comes into sharper focus in the New Testament. Jesus taught us to pray to "Our Father, who art in heaven..." He used the word, Abba, which is less formal than Father, and probably should be translated "Dad," or "Papa." God is our Dad. That makes us siblings. "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God, and so we are," reads the first epistle of John. We are God's children, brothers and sisters of one another--not by birth but by adoption.

We are one big blended family. Happy? Sometimes yes. Other times no. Which is how it is with families, and has been, dating all the way back to the book of Genesis.

Most of us have high expectations of our church family. Consequently, bad behavior at church bothers us far more than bad behavior in other settings. If someone hurts our feelings at work--well, that's one thing--but if someone hurts our feelings at church--well, that's another thing altogether. Our Bibles are full of one story after another of families bickering and feuding and carrying on, but it still comes as a shock, and a blow, when that sort of thing happens in church.

No matter that Abraham himself had family troubles, which he chose to resolve by sending his firstborn son Ishmael & mother Hagar off packing to the desert once Isaac was born to Sarah. No matter that Isaac himself also had family troubles, favoring one son (Esau) over the other (Jacob) and then falling for his wife Rebecca's scheme to get Jacob blessed instead of Esau. No matter that Jacob, too, had family troubles, imagining that his favorite son Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, only to learn much later in life that his other sons had sold Joseph into slavery in Egypt instead.

No matter that the nation Israel endured conflicts and eventually split into two separate kingdoms. Or that the disciples themselves argued over who was the greatest, or that

Jesus' dear friend Martha tried to humiliate her sister Mary in front of Jesus, or that Paul's letters to the early churches indicate power struggles, leadership splits, cliques, and other squabbles.

Somehow the expectation remains that churches will be above all of this and that one's church family won't have any "family dynamics," but will (and *should*) somehow float above it all: one big *happy* family, singing "Kum Ba Ya" and serving Jesus Christ in perfect harmony. The truth is, no church was ever that way, and no church will in all likelihood ever be that way, because churches by definition are full of *sinners*. But the expectation remains.

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians speaks directly to these issues, particularly in chapters 12 and 13 which will be our focus for three Sundays, starting today. Paul responds to internal quarreling in the Corinthian church by putting down in writing a way of thinking about church that I believe is more helpful than the idealized "big happy family" metaphor that gets us into so much trouble.

The church, Paul writes (in next week's lesson) is the *body of Christ* and we are individually members of it. The way the freshmen, sophomores, juniors and seniors across the street make up the Bloomfield High School student *body*, and the way the voting electorate in this country make up the *body politic*, so do church members, together, act as Christ's *body*.

Elsewhere in the epistle Paul will offer some concrete suggestions, but for the most part he does not take it upon himself to arbitrate the Corinthians' disputes for them or micromanage their affairs. Nor does he dish out pious platitudes that sound good but solve nothing.

What Paul does do in his letter is turn the Corinthians' attention outward from a narrow and mostly negative focus on internal problems to an expansive and appreciative view of God's Holy Spirit blessing the body with more gifts than it had yet figured out how to use in an orderly and constructive way!

"Now there are varieties of gifts," Paul writes, "but the same Spirit." Likewise there are varieties of services and activities inspired by--or made possible by--the same Spirit.

As the Corinthians argued over whose gifts, services and activities were more important, as they jockeyed for power, control, and positions of privilege, Paul interjected facts. Spiritual facts. "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good."

Paul said--in so many words--"What you experience as conflict can be better understood as a great jumble of strengths and abilities through which the Holy Spirit works for the common good." To each is given a "manifestation" of the Spirit, says Paul, and notice that word "manifestation." Manifestation. Haven't we heard that word around here recently?

Last Sunday we talked about the Baptism of the Lord and two Sundays ago we talked about the visit of the wise men. Both were *epiphanies*, occasions on which something about God showed itself or was *made manifest*, revealed, in a startlingly fresh way.

Today we read that God gives each of us an *epiphany* of some kind. To each is given the *manifestation* of the Spirit--for the common good. Epiphanies are not a thing of the past, not "one and done" as they say. Epiphanies are happening now. They are hapening right and left. God is giving them out. One person has a set of spiritual gifts that can help all of us know and serve Christ. And another. And another. I, too, have a set of spiritual gifts that can help all of us know and serve Christ, and so do you.

Think symphony orchestra: the strings play a melody, the woodwinds play harmony, the brass a variation, while the percussion sets the tone, the pace, and the energy level. Each musician is given a portion of the composer's musical dream to make real for the common good, that is, to be played at the right time in the right way according to the conductor's cues.

Think fireworks. Think art class. Think... church committee! Everyone around the table is sitting on an epiphany. Everyone around the table is a firework waiting to light the night sky, a painting about to take shape out of the color blocks and textured strokes of the artist' hand.

To each--meaning, to you,--is given (not will be given or once was given but is given already and ongoing) a manifestation of the Spirit. What is your epiphany? What manifestation of God's presence is alive in you, working through you, for everybody's wellbeing? God is revealed in you in some particular way that is supposed to benefit the whole.

"We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality," said Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. "[We are] tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."¹

This sentiment of the Baptist preacher turned Civil Rights leader is about more than the mechanical relatedness of one part of a system to another. We know through observing nature and we know through our experience in organizations large and small that each part affects the whole. But what Dr. King wanted to do was push that notion a little farther, push it into Christian territory, and exhort people to recognize their mutual relatedness as a blessing with an obligation attached, a blessing that obliges us to work for the good of all and particularly of the oppressed.

"Humanity is like an enormous spider web," writes Frederich Buechner, "so that if you touch it anywhere, you set the whole thing trembling... As we move around this world and as we act with kindness, perhaps, or with indifference, or with hostility, toward the people we meet, we too are setting the great spider web a-tremble. The life that I touch for good or ill will touch another life, and that in turn another until who knows where the

trembling stops or in what far place and time my touch will be felt. Our lives are linked together."2

And I have a story about that:

My husband Carlos's family fled Cuba in 1962 during the early years of Fidel Castro. Right before they left, they handed over the keys of their house to Che Guevara, and boarded a plane to Miami, having been allowed to bring with them a grand total of \$10 per family member. After five years making a go of it in Puerto Rico, Carlos' father was presented with an opportunity to work in Chicago. So the family boarded a plane, and flew to Chicago. They landed at O'Hare Airport in the middle of a blizzard and a garbage strike. They were met at the airport by Rev. Ezekiel Alvarez, a Presbyterian minister who helped arriving refugees find a place to live and learn some of the ways of the city.

Carlos was five years old when his family landed at O'Hare Airport. He will tell you that what he remembers from that day are the black shoes that Rev. Alvarez wore as he led the family through the airport, to the car, and from the car past pile after pile of snow-covered garbage, to an apartment where his mother immediately turned cardboard boxes over to become a dinner table and chairs.

Yes, all those things he remembers, but mostly the black shoes of the Presbyterian minister who welcomed them.

Meanwhile, across the city, at Ravenswood Presbyterian Church, I remember a box in a hallway near the front stairs of my home church where families like mine would bring donations of food. Our church was a supporter of Casa Central, a refugee resettlement house. We donated food and clothes and we took special offerings, always for Casa Central. I had no direct connection to Casa Central, but supporting it was what our church did, and we did it well.

Years later, after Carlos and I were engaged, we were over at my parents' house and they were asking him about the family's move to Chicago. Carlos told the story of how he remembered following the black pair of shoes through O'Hare Airport, and he even supplied the name of the minister who had met them: Rev. Ezekiel Alvarez.

"Oh really?" said my mother. "From Casa Central."

That is the *exact moment* that I learned--really learned--what it means to be the Body of Christ.

The ministry of the man in the black shoes was something that I and my family and my church had supported since I was the exact same age as my future husband as he walked with his four brothers and sisters, bewildered, through the world's largest airport into a garbage strike in the dead of winter and into a whole new life.

I share with you this manifestation of the Spirit, this epiphany, for the common good. I share it to help us think as broadly as possible about who we are and what we are called to do. The "common good" does not mean just us here now. The common good does not just mean those people we can see with our own two eyes and feel good about helping in the moment.

If we are really after the common good, there may be picket lines to join, there may be organizations to write checks to, year after year, just because we know they do good work and for no other reason. If we are really after the common good we will show up for the tasks to which God calls us, we will offer what we can for the common good.

We won't be so preoccupied about being one big happy family because we will be too busy being amazed, dazzled and awestruck at the abundance and variety of gifts that God has tumbled into our laps, and we will be happily busy figuring out how best to use them in an orderly and constructive manner.

To the glory of God.

Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling

1King, Martin Luther, Jr. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963

2Buechner, Frederick. Listening to your Life, (Harper: San Francisco, 1992), p. 139.

