

Like a Real Family
A Sermon on John 14:15-21 by the Rev. Philip Major
St. Paul's ~ Syracuse, NY ~ May 14, 2023

I'd like to take a few minutes on this Mother's Day to think about families. Let's start with a story about someone who treasured mothers, in part because he never had much attention at all from his own mother. He was someone who had strong feelings about what is most important in our families. For the purposes of this sermon, I'll just call him 'Bob'.

Bob's growing up years were difficult. He was adopted by his aunt as an infant, but life in his adopted family was rough. There was lots of fighting and not much order or affection. Bob's stepfather abused him. At one point in his teen years Bob was awakened in the night by one of his stepbrothers. He was pointing a loaded gun at Bob's head.

Bob ended up going to prison as an adult. When Bob was in prison, he began attending worship services. For the first time, he heard stories about a man named Jesus. Bob attended and joined every single church group possible while he was in prison. He sang in the choir. Eventually he was baptized.

When Bob was released from prison one of the first things he did was to look for a church to join. That's how he came to St. Paul's. Bob was welcomed, first by our ushers, then by our members and by me. Bob loved St. Paul's.

As an ex-convict, life was difficult. It was hard for Bob to find a decent place to live. It was hard for him to find a job that would let him use his gifts. But the community of St. Paul's was good and encouraging and abundant. Bob loved attending worship and coming to coffee hour. Within a few weeks, Bob was one of our most active members. He volunteered as an usher. He helped with receptions. Bob hosted movie nights in the Brewster Room. Even though he didn't have much money, when Bob hosted a church dinner he bought the very best food, twice as much as was needed.

Bob thrived in the community and caring of St. Paul's people. Bob found great joy in the abundant life we share together. Bob made connections with as many people as he could. I'm pretty sure Bob understood better than any of the rest of us the greatest gift of St. Paul's, which is the connection of our members with one another.

A little while after Bob arrived, he participated in our new member class. Mark told me he wanted to be confirmed in the Episcopal Church, so we arranged for him to be confirmed by Bishop DeDe when she came to St. Paul's for her annual visit. A year or two later, about one month into the pandemic, Bob died from heart failure. He was 44 years old.

Bob died, but many of us will never forget what he said and did during his time with us. I will never forget what Bob told Bishop DeDe the day of his confirmation. He said, "Most families don't act the way a family is supposed to act. St. Paul's is like a real family. People at St. Paul's treat each other the way people are supposed to treat each other in a family."

Bob understood what we need most. When Bob said, "St. Paul's acts like a real family." he was pointing toward the behaviors and values that serve as our foundation: authenticity, honesty, mutuality, reconciliation, listening to others, respect for each individual as one created in the image of God.

Bob understood what is most important about St. Paul's, and Bob understood what is most important about Jesus teaches us. The two things are connected. At our best, St. Paul's acts like a healthy family. Likewise, Jesus is trying to get his disciples to act like a healthy family.

I'd suggest that much of our 21st century understanding of what makes a healthy family comes from Jesus' directions to his disciples to act as God's family. Throughout the Gospels Jesus invites all people, including the great masses of hardworking poor people, to leave behind their

previous tribal allegiances in order to become members of the family of God's children. Jesus' directions for his disciples as members of God's family are in stark contrast to the tribal family groups that were so common in Jesus' time, and that continue to be very common in our time.

A tribe is based on devotion to the leaders. God's family is based on devotion to the task of loving one another. A tribe has clear boundaries between those who are inside and those who are outsiders. God's family is open and welcoming. A tribe judges mistakes harshly. God's family encourages reconciliation and healing. A tribe protects the powerful. God's family protects the vulnerable. A tribe honors secrets. God's family honors truth telling. A tribe enforces a hierarchy. God's family sees each person as equal in the eyes of God. Tribal groups are based on conformity. The family of God's people is based on respect for each individual as ones created in the image of God.

In the many episodes of the Last Supper, Jesus is teaching his disciples the most important parts of what it means to be part of God's family. Each of these episodes focuses on one of the core values of God's family. Today's passage from John 14 takes place during the Last Supper. *Jesus said, "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth."* Let's pay attention to two ideas in this passage.

First, notice that Jesus is introducing the idea of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says that God gives us the Holy Spirit. In these verses the Holy Spirit is described as another Advocate. Jesus is our first advocate.

Second, let's consider that it is difficult to precisely define the presence or character of the Holy Spirit. So we should pay attention to the Greek word used to describe the Holy Spirit in the Gospel of John, which is translated here as 'advocate'. The Greek word is 'parakletos'. The paraclete is a description of the Holy Spirit.

This is one of those situations where the English translation in the Bible might keep us from considering the broader, deeper meaning. An advocate could be one who is like an attorney in a court of law. The idea of the Holy Spirit as an advocate, like an attorney, is helpful but it doesn't give us a complete understanding. We can't describe the Holy Spirit with a single, practical definition. 'Paraclete' has deeper, richer meanings. The direct translation of paraclete is as the one who is alongside us, and who calls to us.

The Holy Spirit is the part of God that is alongside us, and the part of God that calls to us. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth and is in some way, of one being with the one we call the Lord of love. The Holy Spirit's presence and voice among us are manifested in gentleness and persistence.

Gentleness and persistence are critical features of the spirit that pervades Christian communities which act as God's family. So we who strive to live as God's family spend time listening for the direction of the Holy Spirit in our lives; her voice is gentle but it is persistent. We honor each individual as a child of God. We strive to follow Jesus' way of love and forgiveness.

We also understand that each one of us will fail at times. We need deep, spiritual ways and clear, practical ways to respond to our failures and promote the health of our church family. The spiritual ways include broad ideas like reconciliation. The practical ways include the many structures and guidelines we use to guide the work of the church. St. Paul's Executive Ministry Team, Vestry, and more than a dozen other committees or groups within the church guide our church family as we seek to behave like God's family, or, as Bob would say, 'like a real family.'

Our goal is to be led by the gentle, persistent voice of the Holy Spirit. Our goal is to practice the mutuality and servant leadership Jesus taught his disciples. Our goal is to follow Jesus' example and encourage authenticity, reconciliation, and respect for the gifts of each member. Our goal is to act like a real family, loving one another as God loves us.