

Are You My Mother?

3rd Sunday After Pentecost June 10, 2018

In the name of the one who names us, claims us and makes us his own, Amen.

In 1858, newly nominated Illinois Senatorial candidate Abraham Lincoln addressed the republican convention in Springfield warning about the way slavery was dividing the nation, paraphrasing today's gospel reading by announcing that "a house divided against itself cannot stand." At the time, the speech was roundly criticized; it was felt by his friends that Lincoln was being too radical, too outspoken, Rocking the boat. Lincoln disagreed. Looking back, he said proudly, "If I had to draw a pen across my record and erase my whole life from sight, and I had one poor gift or choice left as to what I would save from the wreck, I should choose that speech and leave it to the world unerasable." For Lincoln, life seemed to be all about union. If you will, about keeping his family together, all of us brothers and sisters regardless of color.

PD Eastman is a name that should be familiar to you if you are a parent, as he was the author of such literary masterpieces as *Go Dog Go*, *Big Dog Little Dog* and his defining opus, *Are You My Mother?* I don't think it was intended, but in hindsight there is a strong link between today's gospel reading and the children's book. Both in their way explore the importance of family and the fluidity of how that can be defined. Jesus does not limit himself to the simple definition of a nuclear family; he expanded the definition to include all who do the will of God. All those are his brothers and, his sisters, his mother. The lost bird had no preconceived idea of who his mother was, leading him on an odyssey to find his family.

Yes, I know the parallel is simplistic, but this is a topic that I keep wrestling with, defining to myself who my family is and considering how wide the circle has the potential to be. For many of us, this is a challenge. Just how many people are we expected to care about?

Oh, all of them. "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

And here's a shocker. Not everyone in a family has to look alike. Or even speak the same language. And especially, drawing inspiration from the wonderful work of our friends from *On Gracie's Wings*, not all families begin their journey together. Disciples of Christ minister Danny Gulden was thinking as I have been about the reach of families and our responsibility to care for all our brothers and sisters, especially given the recent immigration discussion. His essay this week, *Who Would Jesus Separate*, opens with this premise: "Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night and went to the United States, and upon arrival Joseph and Mary were arrested and the child was separated from them, never to be seen by his parents again." He is constantly amazed that we seem to "feel no responsibility for outrage or actions around issues

that should alarm people of faith,” listing “racism, sexism, the treatment of transgender folks in our military, the rise of white supremacy, the proliferation of gun violence, and the marginalization of the poor. The list is long and overwhelming. As alarming as the list is, the church must not miss the treatment of children at the border. These are some of God’s most vulnerable children and people of faith cannot turn a blind eye to their plight.” He continues “I understand that we need border security, but it’s a shame that the language of legal and illegal has entered our vocabulary. It has caused a gross misunderstanding of how God views each person and creates a false dichotomy of how people should be treated. No matter what we choose to call someone, God simply recognizes them as God’s beloved child. The labels we use fool us into thinking we are someone different or better than others. They force us further away from God’s realm rather than moving us closer to God’s realm.” To me, it’s turning our backs on the image of Jesus looking at those who sat around him and saying these. These are my brothers and sisters.

Our house, our divided house is shaking on its foundations. I don’t know if you ever watch the Daily Show with Trevor Noah, but the news happens so fast, and so many things hit all at once that he has a recurring piece called “I don’t have time for this”, as in I’d love to talk all about this topic, but then this happened so now we have to talk about that. I feel that way just about the past week. I mentioned the whole civility debate last Sunday, but there has also been that separation of immigrant families at the border that Reverend Gulden talked about, the graduation of the students at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas High School in Florida and their moving tribute to their fallen classmates and teachers, the Supreme Court’s decision on the bakery versus the same sex wedding couple and honestly, it’s just so hard to keep up when your heart is breaking.

Let me just repeat this point: Jesus tells us pretty clearly that the bounds of family are far wider than the walls of our homes. And we consistently ignore him.

So I have an apology to make. Last weekend I shirked my duty as a deacon in God’s holy catholic and apostolic church and I intentionally ignored the fact that Sunday was Gun Violence Awareness Sunday. I did not wear orange. I kind of needed to take a break from all of it, from the divisiveness, from the knowledge that history may look back on us and have a hard time deciding what to save from the wreck, as Lincoln said. I needed a break from the fear that possibly I am the strong man in today’s parable, tied and helpless as my house is plundered. I kind of felt like a picnic with my friends.

Fortunately, there were many others that picked up the gauntlet, devoted people of every faith who heard our children crying in the wilderness and said “Enough”. Devoted people who heeded Bishop Curry’s plea that we “rise up and lay down our differences.” That we “work together to make our schools safe, to make our streets safe, to make this country safe for all of God’s children and all of God’s people.” Tireless people who understand that we have been created by God, we belong to God and all our lives are valuable. That we are family, all brothers and sisters.

Jesus upended the norms of first-century society by claiming that families were not determined by blood or kinship but rather by doing the will of God. In the same way the definition of our families changed.

Matthew Skinner, a professor at Luther Seminary asks us to “consider the relationship between a family and what it means to know and do God's will. Can only certain kinds of families reflect or promote God's will, as Jesus articulated it in terms of mercy, love, justice, protection, holiness, and well-being? Can only certain families express the belonging and solidarity that God desires to share with humanity?

Obviously, Christians have not found consensus on these topics, as discussions of sexuality and marriage have polarized many communities. Yet the discussions, impelled by the cultural urgency surrounding the issues, have also brought many into deeper understandings about what kind of living might be consistent with Jesus' life and message.”

I've been humming Sister Sledge all day: We. Are. Family. All of us, of every gender, orientation, color and language make up a beautiful family of God's sons and daughters with equal rights and equal need for protection. If you feel the need to be an activist, be one. If you feel the need to write a letter, write one. Please understand, I don't care who you voted for, I don't care who you vote for in the future; it's none of my business and I truly do respect differences. I do care that we...care. That we use our varied and wonderful gifts to keep all our families strong and safe and our collective house secure on its foundation.

Amen.