

RUC Sermon May 2019
by Carolyn Butler

FAMILY: Consciously and intentionally extending the concept of family.

Eph 3:14-21

The tradition of Mother's Day and some history: I had a moment's pause when Suellen reminded me last week that I would be preaching on Mother's Day. It brought back memories of my growing up years in a country church in Illinois where mothers were really paid attention to: the oldest, the youngest, the newest, the one who came from the greatest distance, etc etc. Thankfully you are being spared that this morning ... although I do think I may be the oldest mother here and I could do with a nice geranium...

Rather than focus today on mothers, I have chosen to focus on the theme of family. Not a new concept, of course. The term 'the family of God' is a frequently used in evangelical and liturgical circles and there are scripture verses that encourage that image.

- The Apostle John writing late in the first century reminded his readers of "the great love which the Father bestowed on us in calling us children of God",
- Paul used the same terminology in his letters to the churches: he reminded the new believers in Galatia that they had become part of the household of faith and the new believers in Ephesus that they were not "not living like aliens in a foreign land, but were fellow-citizens with God's people, members of God's household".

Probably these familiar verses don't resonate with us that much these days. And yet the idea of "family" is reaffirmed constantly in our life as believers, especially here at R.U:

- The harvest festival last weekend was what started me thinking of this concept of family: anyone who needs, take and if you don't need right now, take for someone else. It's all in the family.
- The food program for the school children where women of caring concern feeds several hundred children their main meal four days every week.
- The focus on 'spatial justice' where land claim development is part of restitution, affirming that all family has a right to their share..
- The active participation in environmental issues, sustaining life for families of the future.

This congregation consistently extends the meaning of family to include a much wider circle of people as well as environmental issues. It may be a good reminder for today of how much we already participate in family and where there are still invitations.

It's very likely that wherever you spend most of your time, you have opportunity for creating family.

In academics, in business, in medicine and health care, in the counselling services, in palliative care, in NGO outreaches, and many others,

In addition to whatever else you are doing, in all probability you are extending family. Any time and place and way people become part of our lives, no matter how briefly, they are in some sense part of our family and we of theirs.

So one invitation is, where are you creating family?

With flatmates, roommates in a dorm, colleagues, neighbours, people at the robots, other employees, service people, senior citizens and children. ...

And what does that mean, practically?

What does being part of a family mean?

Any family? Specifically, the family of God?

I suggest that you/we are creating family every time we are consciously and intentionally

- **Entering into the story**
- **Sharing the journey**
- **Shaping the destination of another person no matter how consistently or how briefly**, is extending invitation to family. This family can happen in each area with different destinations, different stops along the way.

BUT FOR NOW LET'S FOCUS ON THE CHURCH AS FAMILY

Family consists of any person or group of people you walk a consistent and congenial faith journey with. ...Or at least an intentional faith journey...

This journey includes people of all races/tribes/social groups.

This congregation has through the years made welcome the people who cannot feel at home in other places.

During the xenophobic horrors, yes, but also a dedicated and intention welcome to any and everyone who comes in the door regardless of political, sexual, religious orientations.

Family also consists for most, if not all of us, of the outcasts and the UN-wanted/washed/claimed of society that step up to our windows at every robot, ring the gate bell at such inconvenient times.

Scripture becomes so familiar to us it's easy to miss the ready applications and the similarity to our daily lives. I was suddenly struck by a passage I read the other morning: As Jesus walked along in a crowd "a leper approached him, bowed before him, and said, "Sir, if only you will, you can make me clean". Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, "I will, be clean".

The shock effect of this story is easily lost: This leper had the audacity to approach Jesus – no standing afar off or ringing a bell to ward people away as the religious and social law demanded-- breaking all the accepted rules. Jesus, by touching him, did the same thing. A far cry from my habit of hoping for a green light at the robot, trying to decide on the facial expression to offer the person or persons approaching the car window...even the ones we know by name...

Family consists of the situation in which you live a family role: fathering/mothering/being a brother or sister/a grandparent/an auntie or uncle, genetically or opportunistically.

This extended family is a place for extended understanding of the mysteries and challenges of faith, of values, of world view. Nothing but nothing has shaped my view of the modern world and society like chauffeuring my grand-daughters and their friends!! The understanding and use of the acronyms that shape their thinking is an education in itself! The causes the support. The rules they deliberately break. The protests they stage.

It's not the family role we may have expected, but it is unending education.

Family consists of a created space for spiritual exploration: for extending faith and understanding beyond the previously accepted belief systems. Or not. At least being exposed to new ways of looking at spiritual truths in a caring environment.

The spiritual language of this time is which we live opens up new areas of connection and outreach; new ways of being in familial relationship with nature, with our environment. While much of it is helpful, it's also confusing. For me at least...

I don't even know what religious authors are talking about in the terms making religious headlines: Deep Incarnation, which is used in theological language to indicate "the radical divine reach in Christ through human flesh all the way down into the living web of organic life with its growth and decay, amid the wider processes of the evolving nature that beget and sustain life". Right... (quote from Niels Gregersen used by Elizabeth Johnson in her book Creation and the Cross).

Or this one: "In the Incarnate One God shares the life conditions of foxes and sparrows, grass and trees, soil and moisture". (same)

Or the book title of the new book by the guru that has recently been shaping spiritual thinking for many of us, Richard Rohr's latest publication is entitled: The Universal Christ: How forgotten reality can change everything we see, long for and love.

I find so much of this new information daunting. There's a lot about what the author of a book we are studying, in a group of Christians much younger than I am, that shakes my evangelical roots, makes me uncomfortable, but here again I find the blessing of Family. People who are younger, more widely read, better educated than I am hold a theology I am uncomfortable with. But they also stretch my spiritual horizons for which I am thankful.

I'm also comforted by the older siblings I walk with. A good friend preached at St Andrews at over Easter and when thanked her after the service she reached out and took both my hands, and I surprised us both by asking: "Denise do you really believe what you just preached?" And she promptly answered, "Yes, I do.... I haven't always, ... and it isn't easy, but I do!" An older sister in the faith family is indeed a gift.

So in the light of all this language about family, let's look again at the passage in Ephesians that Judy read for us, and turn it into a prayer:

With all this in mind, then, we bow in prayer to the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, asking that out of the treasures of his glory this God may grant us inward strength and power through the Spirit, that through faith Christ may dwell in our hearts in love. With deep roots and firm foundations may we, in company with all God's people, be strong to grasp what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love, and to know it, though it is beyond knowledge. So may we be filled with the very fullness of God.

Now to the God who is able through the power which is at work among us to do immeasurably more than all we can ask or conceive, to that God be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus from generation to generation forevermore! Amen.