

Sermon: May 14, 2023 – John 17: 6-23

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church – Rev Greg Wooley. Preached in Banff.

This is one of those weekends when the Church year and everyone else's year intersect in unpredictable ways. As a kid, growing up in a suburban United Church congregation in the south end of Regina, the 2nd Sunday in May was always Christian Family Sunday, and a number of United Churches (and perhaps congregations of other denominations?) did the same. I liked this, as it acknowledged that Mother's Day and Father's Day don't evoke the same emotions in all people, and it also allowed families to mark these days in whatever way they chose without a lot of Church expectations layered on top. So, "Christian Family Sunday" remained in my early years of Ministry, until I arrived in my mid-30s as Minister of a New Church Development congregation in north Calgary filled with young families. In THAT place, Mother's Day – and make no mistake about it, it was Mother's Day, not "Christian Family Sunday" – was THE high holy day of the year and one under-celebrated it at one's peril, which I learned the hard way.

Although there is no archaeology to back me up on this, I believe it is safe to say that Jesus celebrated neither Mother's Day nor Christian Family Sunday, but it's also clear from scripture that Jesus had a concern for his disciples that was nothing short of familial, even maternal. This was the one who referred to self with the metaphor of a mother hen gathering her chicks (Luke 13:34), and a shepherd keeping his little lambs safe from harm (Luke 12, John 10). There was a belovedness in Jesus' connection with his disciples – those who ministered with him 2000 years ago, and those gathered in this place today – that exemplifies a family at its best. We know also from the gospels that within the earliest followers of Jesus, there were at least two sets of brothers in the inner circle of twelve disciples (James and John, and Andrew and Simon Peter) and that a household of three siblings – Mary, Martha and Lazarus – were extremely close to Jesus, providing a safe haven for him (John 11). And in the gospel of John (19:27), we have explicit mention of Jesus' own mother, Mary, being present at the foot of the cross, and yet in another place (Matthew 12: 48-50), Jesus, on being told that his family has come to see him - or was it to talk him out of his ministry?- he blurts out, "who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" and claiming this role for his disciples placing his heart in the hands of those who spent their days engaged in his revolutionary ministry of liberating love, rather than his birth family. On this Mother's Day/Christian Family Sunday, these gospel references of family-by-blood and family-by-choice gives us some grounding to think of the familial connections that accompany the deepest journeys of our lives.

As one who grew up in a small family – my parents, and one brother, nearly 11 years older than me – trying to picture Jesus and his many disciples as a large and fluid family, where people came and went, was well beyond my experience... until I became friends with a boy whose family was quite different from mine. He was one of five children, and in his house there were always people coming and going. Now and then I would stay and have supper with them, and as I recall it, it wasn't unusual to look around the supper table and see one or two other kids who also had just dropped in. In the easy-going "open table" of that household – including some jostling that wasn't part of my family experience – my understanding of "family" was broadened. My understanding of family continued to broaden in my early years of Ministry, as my heart was opened to the experiences of neighbours and parishioners who'd been abused in their families of origin, or who had been raised by relatives or foster parents, or who could not marry the one they loved because same-gender marriage was not yet allowed, or had no blood relatives and had instead built sturdy friendships and Church connections that functioned as their beloved family. In all of this, I came to realize that

“family” is a word that carries a bunch of different emotions, and is shaped in many different ways.

So having said all that – we return to our gospel reading today, from the 17th chapter of John. Taken together, the 14th to 17th chapters of John form a narrative unit often referred to as the “farewell discourses” – the heartfelt words of Jesus to prepare his faith family for life after his physical departure from their midst. He wanted them to know that God would not stop looking over them – the Holy Spirit would come to them here on earth, and there would also be a safe a glorious place for them beyond this life – and he implored them to understand how important it was for them to be people of LOVE. The same love that bound Jesus to God as child to parent, had the power to hold them together, to unify and energize them, if they would give themselves over to that love, rather than giving themselves over to other emotional lures.

Meda Stamper, a Presbyterian Minister from the southern USA now living and Ministering in the UK, describes this loving purpose expressed by Jesus and those who choose to be his disciples by writing “Jesus does not shirk the pain and confusion of the world. He comes to it. This is true in every Gospel. Completely. And so we go there with him when we choose to locate ourselves in his Good News and when we choose to embody God’s love ourselves. We go there, but we don’t settle into the pain. Jesus changes things, and God’s love changes things. So we become part of the hopefulness. God’s light shines into darkness even through the cracks in our earthen vessels.”

Engaging the pain and confusion of the world without being ultimately defeated by it, embodying the good news of Jesus as we let love be our guide, is what Jesus was equipping the disciples for as he prayed for them in the 17th chapter of John, saying:

⁹ “I’m praying ... for those you gave me [O God], because they are yours. ¹⁰ Everything that is mine is yours and everything that is yours is mine; I have been glorified in them. ¹¹ I’m no longer in the world, but they are in the world, even as I’m coming to you. Holy Father, watch over them in your name, the name you gave me, that they will be one just as we are one. ¹² When I was with them, I watched over them in your name, the name you gave to me, and I kept them safe. [And now,] ¹⁵ I’m not asking that you take them out of this world but that you keep them safe.... ²² I’ve given them the glory that you gave me so that they can be one just as we are one. ²³ I’m in them and you are in me so that they will be made perfectly one. Then the world will know that you sent me and that you have loved them just as you loved me”.

What a powerful connection here, between Jesus, and his earthly family of companions and comrades, and his family bond with the God of the Universe. Jesus prays for his circle of care and for us, to have a love that binds us not only to one another, but a love that infuses our efforts to live love into the world, a love which inspires us and watches over us. Again, I turn to the words of Meda Stamper, who states this about today’s reading from John:

Jesus prays “that all disciples of all time may be one, in the specific sense in which Jesus and the Father are one: the mutual indwelling of love....

“Like the love for one another (in John 13:34-35), which is a way for other people to see that we belong to Jesus... the oneness Jesus asks for here among those who believe in him is not an exclusive club, but an invitation to the world—an invitation as open, loving, joyful, and fruitful as we can allow ourselves to be.

“[This love] is a behavior-shaping attitude toward the world, which is both a gift we cannot manufacture and a choice to live into the promises of that gift that is already given.... We become more loving by choosing to follow Jesus’ model and teachings (13:14-15) about what love is: tending, feeding, bearing witness, and breaking barriers for love—societal barriers and also barriers we set up for ourselves, [which] we may think make us rightly religious but which do not make us loving.

“Oneness and love are linked throughout the passage with knowledge, and that is where it concludes. To know God is to have love in us and to have Jesus in us.... This love is the substance of Jesus’ glory. And it is what he wants us and the world to know”.

In case we thought that our connection with Jesus, and our calling as disciples of Jesus, was about something other than love, this fervent prayer by Jesus on our behalf makes it clear, that the first thing about our connection to God and our connection to our neighbours is love, and the last thing is love, and all the things in-between are love. Jesus wants us to embody God’s own love, and prays for our safety and our togetherness as we advocate for love in a world that is frequently motivated by something other than love. And by love, here, we include all those things that are in the heart of God, the key elements that Jesus kept on saying and doing throughout his Ministry: a love that protects and defends those regularly targeted by others; a love evidenced by just, equitable conditions for all of God’s children; a love of forgiveness and reconciliation and accountability. This is not a soft, timid love that merely hopes the best, it is Christ’s own engaged love that makes choices, and says hard things, and draws us together as the kind of family that will fiercely defend any who have been put in a vulnerable position by others. It’s even a love that gets put to work during an election campaign... just sayin’.

As noted on the front of today’s bulletin, our United Church crest, first developed in 1930, has always included the Latin version of John 17:21, “that all may be one” and in 2012 the Mohawk version of this was added, along with the four colours of the Medicine Wheel. These words are not there merely as vestiges of an early 20th century expression of hope for a made-in-Canada denomination that would bring together Protestant Christians from Sea to Sea to Sea. These words express Christ’s own hope, Christ’s own prayer, that we will find a unified purpose in God’s barrier-breaking love. As a community of faith, and as dwellers in these mountain towns, may that love – all that it instills in us, all that it expects of us – energize us for love. In Christ we pray, Amen.

References cited:

Stamper, Meda (general). <https://parisbooksandcats.wordpress.com/about/>

Stamper, Meda (John 13-17). <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-of-easter-3/commentary-on-john-1720-26-5>

<https://united-church.ca/community-and-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/united-church-crest>

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