

Family of God

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This past weekend my Godson and his mother, my best friend, were visiting the Big City. Crosby is almost five years old and has entered the stage where all kissing is yucky. Kissing on TV, his Godmother trying to kiss his forehead before he goes to bed. Just. Yucky. He has entered the stage where he won't eat vegetables and only certain kinds of fruits. And things need to be organized a particular way or else he makes his upsetness known.

However, despite his five year old superiority, he does love holding his mom's hand and my hand and walking down the street or at the Coney Island boardwalk. You see, he has figured out that we are family and family means you hold hands, just so you can feel connected to each other. Family means that you have energy that flows through you built on memories and hopes and dreams only sometimes spoken, but always felt when you hold hands, feeling the sea breeze.

My favorite five year old is trying hard to figure out what it means to be family. He wants to know how we are all connected with each other, who has what role in his

life, and how comfortable and trusting can he be with someone who is a part of his family or, not a part of his family.

This past weekend he got upset with his mother when she called me her best friend. “Mom,” he exclaimed, “Aunt Mieke is not your friend - she is family!” He would ask questions like this, at the dinner table with his mother, my roommate, and myself: “Mommy, is that man,” meaning my roommate, “a part of our family?”

And then, since not long ago when he asked if his mommy would ever marry his daddy and he received the response: “Mommy and daddy tried that and it didn’t work out,” he asked his mommy if she would marry me. All we could say was, “Sorry sweetie, that won’t work out either. But we are both your family and we love you very much.”

He is trying to characterize that which he can’t see, he is trying to put definitions on to his relationships so that he knows **how he is supposed to interact** with people, so he knows who to trust and who should take care of him.

Isn’t it true that throughout our lives we are constantly sizing up how we are to interact with others, based on our relationship to them, or their relationship with people we know? We do this not only with people in our lives, but also in the church. This is part of what can be so hard and also such a growing time when congregations like yours are in an interim period. We have all learned ways of relating over the years with a

particular person as our Pastor, and when this person leaves it upsets the roles we have always found ourselves in, it upsets even how we think we may know God. We have to learn again and anew who we are and how God speaks to us and who we say we are and who others say we are.

I think of what it is like when we gather together for rituals that mark change in our lives. All of our anxiety around familial relationships, around who and how we are defined comes to the surface. In my experience officiating at weddings I have noticed that the single-most stressful and contentious time of the entire process is most often the rehearsal. We gather around the day or the week before. We say a word of prayer and the couple thanks everyone for coming. There are always a million little questions. How do we know when to begin walking? Is the man or the woman on the left? Does the couple face each other or the congregation? But the big questions come out around the order of the procession. Before the rehearsal I have discussed the order with the couple. And every single time someone's feelings are hurt, there is always at least a private fit that is thrown. Does the stepmother process? If so, does she go before or after the mother? What about the sister-in-law? Since the brother is a groomsman, then she is left with no one to walk her down the aisle. These mini and sometimes not so mini-fits and questions revolve around the issue: who is a part of this family and who isn't? What does flesh and

blood mean? How are we supposed to interact? Who are we supposed to trust?

I notice that the most vulnerable in the family system, the ones that aren't sure exactly where they fit, the ones that ask where they are in relationship to others, who ask the most: "is this really my family? Am I wanted in this family? Who do you say that I am?" provide the places of the greatest contention, hurt feelings, confusion, since what we do when we gather together for rituals as important and binding as things like weddings articulate the essence of this question: "who am I in relation to these others, in flesh and in blood, how am I named, who do you say that I am?"

There are those times biblically when our roles and definitions are claimed and explored. Most of the time God is defining our relationship with God or each other. In creation God blesses all that is made. The rivers are named. God sees all of creation, of you and me as good. When the first human found a partner, the relationship was named between the two: "this at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." In Genesis, as Abram's relationship with God changes, so does his name. Chapter 17 verse 5 reads: "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations." His wife Sarai becomes Sarah as she finds herself no longer barren.

Names are often given very intentionally, as they name an experience or a

relationship that has been established through a new birth. Sarah and Abraham's son is named Isaac, which means "he laughed." Remember that Sarai laughed first when she thought she was pregnant, for no way this could be the reality for a woman as old as she.

Abram's mistress, an Egyptian slave girl, whose name was Hagar, was the first person in the Scriptures to name God. She gave birth to Abram's first child, Ishmael, which means "God hears." God hears her cry in the wilderness, and she uses the word: "El-roi" which means "the God who sees" and the well, where God visited her "beer la hai-roi" "the well of the Living One who sees me.

In the New Testament, the second testament relational definitions are also present. Throughout the Bible in its entirety we read lists of family connections. Matthew begins with "an account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and"...on and on. It is important to tell from where we come and therefore to where we are headed.

And in Jesus' baptism, a voice from heaven declared: "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased." The relationship between Jesus and his Heavenly Parent is established at this point: God's beloved. And we remember in our baptism that the relationship of choosing, of claiming, of being named by God is made

known to ourselves and those who promise to support us in our journey of faith. In essence, God claims us as God's own beloved, in life and in death, with whom God is well pleased. God names us in our baptism and claims that relationship of our Creator whose love never runs out.

The question of who we are, of who Jesus is, in relationship to his disciples, in relationship to the Roman Empire, in relationship to humanity for the rest of time comes to a head in our lesson this morning. Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Humanity is?" Is it a trick question? Is he waiting to see if they really get it yet, not only his role in their lives but his role in the redemption of the entire world, from that day forward, his role in giving us a new way to live, a way of liberation and justice that comes from a place of God's love, love that is not boastful or selfish, as we are told in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians?

So, who do we say Jesus is? The disciples tried to take a stab at it, they told him all the names that he had been called. Some say, John the Baptist, others Elijah, others Jeremiah, others one of the prophets. Jesus isn't one whose identity, whose relationship with humanity can be easily put in a box, even from the beginning times of his days walking on the earth. But this isn't really the question he was asking, the question of who do others say that he is. He wanted to know, you know, who the *disciples* said that

he is.

Simon Peter, the one who would betray Jesus and would also be the Rock on which the Church stood, he answered correctly: “You are the Messiah! The Son of the living God!” And despite Jesus’ knowing of Peter’s impending behaviors, in spite of knowing how much Peter would hurt him, would betray him – not once, not twice but three times – Jesus claims his own relationship with Peter, God’s relationship with Peter, and calls him Blessed. Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah!”

And then the pronouncement that comes to my Godson and to you and to me, that “flesh and blood” are not what determines the relationship between them, between us. It is not by flesh and blood that Simon Peter understands that Jesus is the Messiah, but instead our Creator is our connecting tissue, the arms that interlock while walking down the boardwalk, the hands that grasp in busy streets. It is Jesus who is our Messiah, the one who claims us, who identifies the Simon Peter in each of us and calls us still Blessed. It is Jesus who is our Messiah and is therefore our connecting blood across lines of difference which we have learned for too long we cannot cross.

Jesus is clear in his declaration of relationship with Peter, that Peter is Beloved. Peter is clear in his defining of Jesus, as Messiah, Son of the living God. In his times this was not an easy declaration, this slapped the face of the Roman Empire within which they

lived and breathed, which tried to keep relationships across differences of class and political viewpoint separate and distinct.

And so regardless of our anxiety today about who we are in our own families of flesh and blood. Regardless of who others say that we are, how accurate or inaccurate those definitions may be. Regardless of the relationships where we feel most insecure and confused. Regardless of how comfortable we feel in this congregation in the in-between time that you experience. Regardless of the roles we are most uncomfortable in filling in our own lives. Regardless of it all, we can live in the assurance that Jesus gives to Peter, that we hear at our own Baptisms, that we are Blessed, we are God's Beloved. We are given the freedom of connecting across lines of difference, difference that may seem insurmountable but with Jesus our Messiah, can be overcome.

Amen.