

June 6, 2021 Sermon

By Francie Scott

Prayer:

Small Kindnesses

By Danusha Laméris

I've been thinking about the way, when you walk down a crowded aisle, people pull in their legs to let you by. Or how strangers still say "bless you" when someone sneezes, a leftover from the Bubonic plague. "Don't die," we are saying. And sometimes, when you spill lemons from your grocery bag, someone else will help you pick them up. Mostly, we don't want to harm each other. We want to be handed our cup of coffee hot, and to say thank you to the person handing it. To smile at them and for them to smile back. For the waitress to call us honey when she sets down the bowl of clam chowder, and for the driver in the red pick-up truck to let us pass. We have so little of each other, now. So far from tribe and fire. Only these brief moments of exchange. What if they are the true dwelling of the holy, these fleeting temples we make together when we say, "Here, have my seat," "Go ahead — you first," "I like your hat."

I can't remember if it was Jerry or if it was Truman Dunn who once preached a sermon titled "Jesus the Radical." I don't exactly remember the content or even the Gospel lesson from that day, but what I do remember is driving down Peace Haven Road the week prior, noticing the sermon title on the sign out front, and sort of chuckling to myself. That should raise some eyebrows, I remember thinking.

Personally, I find some of the most intriguing writing on Christianity is not necessarily the religious doctrine, but rather the studies of the historical Jesus. The Jesus we try to see and understand in the context of the history and culture in which he lived. We get a glimpse of that in this Gospel lesson, when his family shows up and says "he is out of his mind."

There are apparently some interpretations of this text that take these lines to mean that his family was concerned for his physical health – that he hadn't had the chance to eat so he was acting crazy. Apparently even Jesus could get hangry? I think that's probably oversimplifying it. In his time – can you imagine how Jesus was perceived? To his family, Jesus had become a social embarrassment, a source of shame, and needed to be restrained. In Jesus' time, the dominant social institution was the family, the private home. Here was this man who rejected his obligations to his immediate family and went off to preach the Kingdom of God. Can you imagine how you would react today if your brother, sister,

parent or spouse made a similar decision? Foregoing all personal obligations like earning a living, raising children, supporting a home...claiming he was the son of God? Speaking in parables? At a minimum, I think it would take us all some time to get on board with this kind of quest.

So I guess we could read this and say – his family thought he was crazy, so he retaliated by rejecting them, saying “who are my mother and my brothers” and then claiming his followers as his “real” family. Again, I think that oversimplifies the text.

What Jesus says here radically expands the concept of “family.” Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother. In Christ, God creates a family that transcends mere blood ties. We are called to share together in the privilege and blessing of caring for one another beyond the circle of immediate family life. This is the definition of the church. The family of God.

Now, my personal experience of family has been overwhelmingly positive. I am well aware that this isn’t the case for everyone. And for some this expansive definition of family could feel complicated. If your immediate family relationships are fraught, it doesn’t sound like a very appealing proposition to expand the definition of family. Or does it? The idea that family transcends mere blood ties can also free us to define for ourselves who is our family.

If all people are children of God, then we care for one another in the same way that we care for members of our immediate family.

Have you ever noticed that when families gather – maybe for Thanksgiving or a graduation celebration – people tend to revert back to the same roles and behaviors that were established years ago? Those long-established family processes that govern how you relate to one another – reflexively, siblings take on the same roles they had as children, dad starts lecturing everyone on their behavior, mom makes sure everyone had enough to eat. It can certainly be frustrating, and has probably led to more than one significant family conflict. But at the very core, you know that the reason these roles exist is because you are a family. You can work to change these reflexive behaviors, but the connection will always be there. There’s a great security in that. And freedom as well.

When we act in kinship with one another, when we treat everyone as a member of our family, it means more than loving our neighbor as ourselves. That deeper tie means that in times of conflict, we forgive abundantly. We can disagree, knowing that the disagreement does not change the fact that we are bound to one another. We can make mistakes, knowing that even when we stumble, the kinship is there.

And lastly, we can keep widening the circle of who is invited into God’s family. Rev. Nancy Petty put it this way: “The power of God’s inclusive and radical love breaks through

our walls of division and steps over our lines drawn in the sand. We push the boundaries of inclusion until there are no boundaries when it comes to God's family and God's love."

I'll leave you with this – from someone who said it far more eloquently than I ever could, Bishop Michael Curry:

Think and imagine, well, think and imagine a world where love is the way. Imagine our homes and families when love is the way. Imagine neighborhoods and communities where love is the way. Imagine governments and nations where love is the way. Imagine business and commerce when love is the way. Imagine this tired old world when love is the way, unselfish, sacrificial redemptive. When love is the way, then no child will go to bed hungry in this world ever again. When love is the way, we will let justice roll down like a mighty stream and righteousness like an ever-flowing brook. When love is the way, poverty will become history. When love is the way, the earth will be a sanctuary. When love is the way, we will lay down our swords and shields, down by the riverside to study war no more. When love is the way, there's plenty of good room, plenty good room, for all of God's children.

Because when love is the way, we actually treat each other, well, like we are actually family.