

August 17, 2008 14th Sunday after Pentecost: Why I Go To Church

I have to tell you, I had a really hard time coming up with a sermon for this Sunday. My mind's been so full of Vacation Bible School that every time I tried to think about the sermon, it wandered away to contemplate the next day's craft, or snack, or something that happened that morning, or whatever – then I had to yank it back and try again. So if today's sermon seems a little bumpy you'll know why.

Several weeks ago when I looked at these readings, I thought I'd talk about why I go to church. The reason I went in that direction is the translation of the Psalm we just sang: "How pleasant and harmonious when God's people come together." The old King James version says, "When kindred gather" – in other words, we're celebrating family reunions. Now I don't know about you, but while I love my family, there are some of them it's not that easy to be around. It's not always "pleasant and harmonious". We get on each other's nerves, we wear each other out, we disagree on important issues, our lifestyles don't mesh, our temperaments clash. Still, "how good it is, when kindred come together."

It's also been said that you don't choose your family, you just learn to live with them. Some of us do, and some of us don't. Some of us cut ourselves off from our families, because being with them is just too hard. Most of us though, try to figure out a way to rub along together.

One of the primary images we use for the church is "the family of God". Jesus said he came that all might be called sons and daughters of God. That means we're all related, folks, and it's just like a real family – we don't get to choose who our brothers and sisters are. Even Jesus, it seems, needed to learn that lesson. Or at least, that is what the story we've read from Matthew suggests.

It's clear in Matthew's gospel, that Jesus comes as the fulfilment of Jewish hope and Jewish prophecy. He's placed solidly in line with the prophets and kings of Israel, and Matthew frequently quotes Scripture to make sure we understand that. I'm sure that Jesus' response to the Canaanite woman's pleas reflects the attitudes of many in the early church: some are in, and some are out; some people deserve God's notice, some people don't. But this Canaanite woman is not going to allow herself and her daughter to be excluded from God's mercy. She is clever and strong in her humility. She turns Jesus' words on their heads. "You want to imply I'm as undeserving as a dog? Well, even dogs get the leftovers." Jesus responds to her courage, her cleverness, her persistence, and most of all, her faith, and offers her daughter healing.

The church, throughout the centuries, has grappled with who is in and who is out; who is part of the kingdom of heaven and who is destined for outer darkness; who is part of the family and who is an annoying stranger knocking at the door. One of the reasons I belong to the United Church of Canada, is that we have, over the decades of our existence, continued to draw the circle wide – to include those that others have excluded.

But what has that got to do with actually *coming to church*? One of the reasons I think coming to church is so powerful is that we learn to be inclusive and accepting, not just in theory, but in practice. We rub up against our differences constantly, in every aspect in the life of the church. We have theological differences, because the United Church has always said that there is room for a variety of theological opinions in its congregations; we have differences in what we look for from worship, in our musical tastes, in the way we think we should organize our lives and the way we make things happen. We face fundamental differences in philosophy and life choices, and we learn to respect those differences. Where else would you find a veteran and a peacenik working on friendly terms, an environmentalist and a retiree from the oil fields sharing coffee together, a farmer and a business executive shovelling gravel side by side – and not just tolerating each other, but at least *trying* to love each other, and most of the time, succeeding. It's that last part that I believe makes the Christian community unique. We're not just called to tolerate each other –we're called to love each other. And at our best, we do it.

We really are like family, in that respect. We fight, we disagree, we struggle, we pull in different directions, but in the end, we still love each other. This congregation has gone through a number of conflicts and challenges over the years, and some have left, because they didn't feel they could be part of this family any longer. But others have stayed, and more have come, and we've widened the circle, and kept widening it, and you've continued to love each other in the doing. Not perfectly, not all the time, but you do it – and it's a blessing.

There are, though, some people missing in our pews. Look around here, and you'll see that, on the surface anyway, we're mostly pretty similar in cultural background, income levels, etc. Now I know that's just surface – I know there are real differences between you, and I'm fascinated as I learn more and more about where you've come from and who you are today. But if you look around, you might ask yourself if there are people who aren't here – people who, deliberately or simply unthinkingly – are being excluded.

Jesus' followers, after a while, seemed to take it for granted that the people Jesus' love was for, were people like them. It took the courage and faith of men and women like the Canaanite woman, or the Roman leader whose daughter was ill, or the centurion at Jesus' execution, or the first recorded Gentile converts like Cornelius and his household – it took those people showing up and saying, "We want in, we want to be part of this" to remind them that God's love is for everyone, and that no-one has a preferential place in the kingdom of heaven – or for that matter, in Gordon United Church.

If this is a family, it's a family with no entrance requirements, other than wanting to be a part of it. It's sort of like marrying into a family. In our family, the first time you visit, you're a guest, and we treat you with great respect; the second time you visit, you're family: there's no less respect involved, but we'll wait on you a lot less, and we'll ask you to chip in a little more. If you actually want to be a

long-term part of the crazy Howick/Koschzeck clan, well, then you get in there and get dirty with the rest of us. We'll generally spend some time making sure you know what you're getting into, we'll have a ritual to celebrate the fact that you've joined the family; but once that's done, and the decision's made, we'll treat you just the same as those who have been part of the family their whole lives: with a lot of love, the comfort that comes from familiarity, and occasionally, the carelessness that also comes with familiarity. And if we fall into that carelessness, then we'll do our best to make it up to you – because that's what families do.

This church family's head is Jesus, who loves us all equally, though each of us may experience that relationship in different ways and use different words to describe it. Just like in families, we'll view the head of our family differently, because we hold a different place in the family. But we're still family, and we're still loved.

We live in an age when families are broken apart and re-formed, where extended families live thousands of miles from each other and see each other only once or twice a year, if that. One of the reasons – only one, and not necessarily the biggest one, but the one that came to me with these readings this morning – one of the reasons I come to church is that here, I'm *with family* — not a perfect family, but family just the same. These are people who will love me even when I'm somewhat less than loveable, even when we argue and disagree; these are people who will support me in the hard times and rejoice with me in the good times. I know that that is true for many of you here today. And Jesus' family is never going to kick us out, because that's not who Jesus is, and at their best, that's not who Jesus' people are. We might occasionally have to admonish, we might occasionally have to hold each other responsible for shortcomings, and we might have to make some tough choices sometimes about how we can live together in community, but our energy goes toward inclusion, rather than exclusion.

How good it is to be together as the family of God. How good it is to be together with people who see the world very differently than I do, who place their emphasis on different values than mine, who have different life experiences, different skills, different ways of being, but who have a common commitment to Jesus. How good it is to be together, even when we drive each other nuts, and to know that however badly we might rub up against each other sometimes, if we keep our focus on the love of Christ and how we can witness to that love with each other –well, this family will be here for you, for me, and for anyone else who may be knocking at the door or waiting for an invitation to be part of the family. Amen.