

Families: Biological, Logical, & Otherwise

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N.B. – These sermons are made available with a request: that the reader appreciate that, ideally, a sermon is an oral/aural experience that takes place in the context of worship – supported and reinforced by readings, contemplative music, rousing hymns, silence, and prayer – and that it is but one part of an extended conversation that occurs over time between a minister and a covenanted congregation.

Meditation “Meditation on the Border” - Rev. Rod Richards

We humans are the line-drawers. We are the border-makers. We are the boundary-testers. We are the census-takers. We draw a line to separate this from that, so that we can see clearly what each is. We create a border to define our place, so we can take care of what's there. We test boundaries to find if they are real; if they are necessary; if they are just. We congregate within those boundaries in families and tribes and cities and countries that we call “us.” And we call people on the other side “them.”

But our minds seek boundaries that our hearts know not. The lines we draw disappear when viewed with eyes of compassion. The recognition of human kinship does not end at any border we have created. A wiser part of us knows that the other is us, and we are the other.

Reading “My Ancestral Home” - Louis Jenkins from *European Shoes*

We came to a beautiful little farm. From photos I'd seen I knew this was the place. The house and barn were painted in the traditional Falu red, trimmed with white. It was nearly mid-summer, the trees and grass, lush green, when we arrived the family was gathered at a table on the lawn for coffee and fresh strawberries. Introductions were made all around, Grandpa Sven, Lars-Olaf and Marie, Eric and Gudren, Cousin Inge and her two children... It made me think of a Carl Larsson painting. But, of course, it was all modern, the Swedes are very up-to-

date, Lars-Olaf was an engineer for Volvo, and they all spoke perfect English, except for Grandpa, and there was a great deal of laughter over my attempts at Swedish. We stayed for a long time laughing and talking, It was late in the day, but the sun was still high. I felt a wonderful kinship. It seemed to me that I had known these people all my life, they even looked like family back in the States. But as it turned out, we had come to the wrong farm. Lars-Olaf said, “I think I know your people, they live about three miles from here. If you like I could give them a call.” I said that no, it wasn’t necessary, this was close enough.

Sermon

Haven’t we all known something
of the situation Louis Jenkins was in at the end of his poem?

Trekking half-way around the world to track down distant relatives,
he opts to stick with the kind but total strangers he’s befriended—
rather than risk the potential let-down of meeting his actual kin.

These lovely Swedes were close enough, thank you very much.
Why push his luck? Why defy good fortune?

Who hasn’t at some point thought how nice it would be to be part
of another family—any other family—than our own?

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The writer Armistead Maupin says, tongue in cheek,
that we have biological families and we have logical families.
And he points out that they’re not always one and the same.

We most often speak in our culture of biological family—
the people with whom we likely share DNA and a common history—
as being our kin, our relatives, our flesh and blood.

But many if not most of us, I would venture,
are part of a family that has a broader
and much more inclusive set of boundaries.

Whether they feel logical or completely illogical, at times,
most of us belong to bigger families—
families that aren't bound merely by a common bloodline,
but families held together, instead,
by webs of connection and commitment,
through mutual affinity and affection,
with lots of love and a little luck.

So often we casually describe the people in our logical family
as “just friends,” or a good buddy, or a pal from work or university,
without adequately naming the privileged place they hold in our hearts.

In so doing, we diminish the sense of family that we feel in their presence.

We minimize the place that our logical family holds in our lives,
if we recognize it at all.

Now, this isn't necessarily an either/or situation.
It's possible to happily have both. Most people do.

Our logical family can and often does include within it
our entire biological family.

But this is not always the case.

Truth is, the people to whom we are related
and the people to whom we can relate
are not always one and the same.

At times, they may actually be mutually exclusive.

For some, there is no overlap between their logical and biological families.

There are real and sometimes painful reasons why this is the case—
reasons why some people speak of their family of choice
in contrast to or completely in place of their family of origin.

Relationships break and fall apart.
Distance fails to make hearts grow fonder.
Estrangements become entrenched, teaching us
that blood isn't always thicker than whatever troubles a family may face.

And that all the king's horses and all the king's men
sometimes simply can't put things back together again.

There are people whose story—very much like my own—
has involved a seemingly unbridgeable gulf
between them and their biological family.

A gap that has often inspired them, out of necessity,
to build, to create, to fashion a new and loving family from scratch.

This may sound daunting, and I can personally attest that it is.

As a good many of you know,
the differences between me and my biological family
have been incredibly difficult to overcome.

We hold radically dissimilar religious views,
and they struggle mightily with my sexual orientation,
my marriage, and my work as a Unitarian minister.

To be fair and to be honest,
I struggle in equal measure with their worldview;
and I still have a great distance to go
to more fully appreciate their understanding of things.

To our credit, I believe we have truly tried
to find a way to be in a more meaningful relationship.

And, yet, the tragic reality of our lives is that we live,
literally and metaphorically, in vastly different worlds.

It's been this way, now, for essentially all of my adult life.

But while it has been a source of deep pain for me,
this loss has also brought into my life, out of necessity,
the very real blessings of having a logical family—

the family I have brought together with intention
over the course of the past 25 years.

A family comprised of Bob and his extended family,
dear friends of long-standing and cherished colleagues,
all with a special place in my heart for this congregation.

Fortunately, one need not endure a painful family rift to come to see
the value of embracing a broader definition of what family can be.

A hard fact of being alive is that, for any of us,
the family we set out with in life is rarely the one
with which we journey through the whole of our days on this earth.

Time changes everything.

Under the tick-tick-tocking of the clock,
loved ones die or move far away.

To our surprise, some of us find ourselves living in families of memory,
with most everyone we knew and loved now already gone.

Through the years, for better and for worse, people fade from our lives,
leaving our place in “the family of things” constantly changing.

Requiring that we learn to play new and different parts.

As we age, our accustomed roles shift,
especially as families grow and expand.

The positions we once held when young—
as child or sibling, as nephew or niece,
may continue on for a while, or a very long while,
but also may eventually give way to other roles as we become adults
and take up the parts of parent, aunt and uncle, or grandparent.

Change is the great constant of life.

Which is why, as we take up this month’s question
of what it means to seek a life of kinship,
I believe we would all be well-served

to broaden our definition of what family means—and what it can mean.
To open ourselves to the wider possibilities of kinship.

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Fewer and fewer people live in close proximity to their biological family.

Once upon a time, pretty much the whole family
would have been under one roof.

But now, in significantly smaller families to start with,
we often live great distances apart from one another,
spread out across the city or the country or the globe.

Even with the help of social media,
we live increasingly isolated, insulated lives.

And, yet, our very human needs
for connection, for trust, and for love endure.

We still need to find our place in the family of things.

We need to know the sense of communion and community
that comes through being with others.

What George Vanier spoke of so eloquently
as our profound human need to belong.

What could, in a word, be called kinship.

The anthropologist Marshall Sahlins says of kinship that
its “specific quality... is ‘mutuality of being’:
kinfolk are persons,” he says,
“who participate intrinsically in each others’ existence;
they are members of one another.”

It is that participation that I believe we so deeply crave in our world today.
The gift to know and be known.
To love and be loved.
To belong and be understood.

Which is why, in our changing world,
I believe we require a new and more expansive definition of family:
as groupings of people who may not share common genetic material,
but who share common core values.

As people who look out for one another along life's way.

As people who know that
what touches the life of one of them affects them all.

As people who truly show up for each other and act like family,
even though there may be no biological basis for doing so.

There is a story from Iran originally told by Barbara Kingsolver,
about a baby and a bear.

It's a "true story from our own time, not an ancient fairy tale."

In her essay, Kingsolver says it was not, for her,
just a news story, confirmed by many witnesses,
but also a parable—"a story with many possible meanings,
some still unfolding even now."¹

In her account of the story, my colleague Victoria Safford, says:

In Lorestan province, in Iran, a tiny child, sixteen months old,
who has only just learned how to walk, is missing.

The teenage neighbour girl who was watching him
got distracted for one minute and he must have wandered off.

Terrified, she runs to tell his parents
who are working in the wheat field, and they freeze in disbelief,
then run and tear apart the house, screaming for the neighbours,
who tear apart their houses, all searching for the child.

They spread out in all directions but by nightfall he's [still missing].

¹ As told by Victoria Safford in "Finding Home", 18 May 2014, White Bear Unitarian, Minneapolis, Minnesota.

The next day they expand the frantic search, right to the edge of the forest and steep hills that surround their village, but they do not venture up because there's no way the child could have gotten that far, and it's dangerous there: the last bears remaining in all of Iran live in those hills, and people are afraid of them.

They've hated them for centuries and there are fairy tales, just as there are all over the world, of wolves and bears that eat livestock and children, and some of those stories are true.

But the next day, the parents can't stand it, so with a small party they start climbing these dark wooded hills, and searching the caves.

They come to one and there's no question— they can hear a toddler crying.

So they step inside, flashlights on, and the deeper they go the ranker it smells and it's cold, and sure enough, he's there, curled up against the far back wall—but he's not against the wall.

Their lights reveal a great she-bear lying on her side, the child nestled against her.

She's dripping with milk and his face is all wet, and later that day, after the rescue, the clinic confirms that he is not hurt and he is not hungry, because the bear has nursed him.

This is a true story—not a metaphor for anything—but you can hear it as a parable, and stay open to wonder and amazement.

The veterinary experts say the bear was lactating and there were no cubs; they may have been lost or killed, so this was in some ways natural.

But the people call it a miracle—which it absolutely is—

and they leave a pile of acorns at the entrance to the cave.

This bear has saved a baby. Against her nature,
against all preconceived notions of bearishness,
against one dimension of her animal nature (her hunger),
another instinct, another longing, took over,
defying logic and predictable behaviour.

It wasn't love [per se]—this is not a metaphor—
but the people chose to see in what she did a gift of grace.

Biology is important, but it's not everything.

Sometimes a different logic can be at play.

A logic of longing that calls us to connect, calls us into new community,
even when doing so means moving beyond
old definitions and past understandings.

Though there are a few biological connections between us in this place,
so much of what goes on here in this congregation
involves the creation and maintenance of a logical family.

There is love and affection, caring and concern.
There is tangible support in times of need.

There are disappointments and frustrations, too.

Any family has them. And this one certainly does.

But families, at their best, endure
because they set their hearts to maintaining kinship.

Much of the literature on church theory
advises against using the metaphor of family in congregational life.

Families are complicated, they say.
People have wounds. It invites projection and dysfunction.

And, yet, it seems false to ignore the ties that bind in this place.

The connections that speak of kinship, and even family in the making.

Last weekend, the leaders of the congregation gathered for our annual fall retreat down at the Manulife Centre.

Thanks to Edith Burton, we had use of the party room on an upper floor, with a spectacular view of the city from Charles Street on down to the Lake.

During a meditation exercise,
I asked the leaders to stand facing the windows,
looking out at the city.

Our view was filled with enormous buildings, vast structures housing people in compartments in the sky.

Thousands and thousands of people, most I believe hungering for kinship.
Not at all unlike we who are gathered here today.

In staff meeting on Tuesday, as we discussed how we might better serve the needs of this congregation and the people beyond our walls, we were moved by a simple idea.

Starting on October 1st, with help from at least a few of you, our hope is to begin offering another worship service, each Wednesday night at 6pm.

This experience of worship will include an intentional though simple meal, usually of soup and bread.

It will be a time for music and candles, joys and sorrows, meditation and prayer, readings and reflection, sharing and eating.

Its goal will be nothing short of creating kinship in a more intimate setting than is possible on Sunday mornings.

We'll need people who can see this as the spiritual practice that it is, from making soup and baking bread, to washing dishes, and scrubbing tables.

We're calling it The Dinner Table.
A place where the family gathers,
but where there's always room for more.

A place where we connect and commune,
where we share our lives and where we share ourselves.

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I realize this may sound new, but religious rituals have long involved food.

And I appreciate that this talk of logical family may feel novel or unsettling,
but Unitarians have been redefining family for a very long time.

It was William Ellery Channing, a central founding figure of Unitarianism,
who proclaimed nearly two centuries ago, that:
“I am a living member of the great family of all souls.”

With love and boldness, may we say the very same.

In this month as we consider what connects us,
may we, as a community, grow in our capacity for kinship.

May we, with a generosity of spirit,
open our hearts to a new and expansive notion of family.

And may we hone the sacred craft of hospitality
that we might bring more and more people into its loving embrace.

Amen.