

## Who is Family?

Christian Family Sunday

May 9, 2004

Acts 10: 1 – 18 and following; John 13: 31 - 35

We live in a time when the definition of “family” is on the verge of changing before our very eyes. What is that Chinese curse? May you live in interesting times? We certainly do. If the Supreme Court of Canada and the Canadian parliament decide that marriage can legally take place not only between a woman and a man but also between two men or two women, we will be able to talk about this historic time with our grandchildren, just as my grandparents were able to talk to me about the time when women in Canada were legally declared to be “persons.” Yes, our understanding of family is changing - again. The question for us, as members of the United Church of Canada, is whether our church is being faithful to God as it takes a public position in support of equal marriage. The story from today’s reading from Acts lets us focus on the experience of the early church as it grappled with the question of where God was leading it. Just who is family to the risen Christ?

Peter has no premonition that God is about to shake up his world and shatter his definitions. What he knows, as he prays on the rooftop that afternoon, is that he is hungry! While Peter waits for a meal to be prepared, he falls into a trance and sees a sheet lowered from heaven, filled with all kinds of animals, none of which a good Jew would even consider eating. Yet, a voice invites hungry Peter to kill and eat from these animals. Peter refuses! Never has he eaten food that wasn’t kosher. He is a Jew who keeps the dietary laws God gave Israel in the beginning. Food – what to eat and how to prepare it – was one of those central things that defined who was part of Israel, part of God’s family. Even though the voice said to Peter a second and even a third time, “What God has made clean, you must not call profane,” Peter remains steady. The vision puzzles Peter but it doesn’t cause him to change the menu for dinner!

However, before Peter can analyse the vision too much, he is summoned by visitors – visitors who say their gentile master was visited by an angel who told him to send for this man, Peter. Peter’s vision has had one effect: it causes him to be open to this unexpected invitation. He goes to Cornelius’ home. There he explains to the relatives and friends that Cornelius has waiting: “You yourselves know that it is unlawful for a Jew to associate with or to visit a Gentile; but God has shown me that I should not call anyone profane or unclean. So when I was sent for, I came without objection. Now may I ask why you sent for me?” (10: 28, 29) Cornelius explains his own dream, telling him to invite Peter. Now tell us, Cornelius says to Peter, what is it that God wants us to hear from you? Peter responds by talking about Jesus, his baptism with the Holy Spirit, his message, his healings, his death and resurrection, and his command to preach to the people about God seen in Jesus. As Cornelius and his guests listen to Peter’s message, the Holy Spirit falls on them and they begin to speak in tongues and to praise God. Peter is convinced that God is in this place, God is touching these people and he is moved to baptise them in Jesus’ name.

Now its one thing for an individual to have an experience, even a profound experience of God’s actions, and it is quite another thing for the institutional church to shift its

understanding of the tradition and change its practise. Institutions do not change quickly. Tradition, the way we have done things for many years, is not something we discard without thought. When Peter goes back to the church leadership in Jerusalem, word of his unorthodox behaviour has already reached their ears and they are not happy. Acts tells it like this: "So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?'"

Peter had clearly broken the laws. He had crossed the boundaries of righteous behaviour. He had ignored the tradition that defined who was part of the family of God. He had a lot to account for. So Peter begins with the story of his experiences – the trance in which God challenged his definitions of clean and unclean; the messengers who invited him to the home of a gentile who had also had a vision; the experience of talking with gentiles eager to hear of Jesus; the coming of the Holy Spirit upon these outsiders. Then Peter reflects on words of Jesus himself: "And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, 'John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.'" And so, Peter says to these leaders, "If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?"

Peter stops. There is silence. And then the room erupts with praise and rejoicing! "Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life," they say to one another. It is a miracle – something totally unexpected, unprepared for, shocking and awesome at the same time. Just what it will mean, the kind of chain reaction that will come...all of the questions that will still have to be sorted out remain - but the clear news is that God is acting. God is doing something new. And the church, realizing this, discerning this action of God, can only be faithful as it follows God.

Now, changing an institution, even as young an institution as the church was in its earliest days, is not an overnight thing. People, with good cause, are reluctant to part with tradition unless they are really convinced that God is behind such a new direction. Not everyone had Peter's direct experience. Not everyone even had the experience of hearing Peter tell this powerful story. There were Christians who remained unconvinced. Some of them travelled and preached in Gentile territory and the book of Acts tells us "they spoke the word to no one except Jews." (11:19) But among the travelling preachers were some who spoke to Gentiles in Antioch, and here, too, a large number became believers and turned to the Lord. The apostle Paul establishes congregations made up largely of non-Jews. And we can only be grateful because we, too, are non-Jews, Gentiles. God opened a door to us. Time showed that, indeed, God was doing a new thing.

This one biblical story has some important things to say to the times we live in – this time when our tradition of marriage, our concepts of family, even our sense of identity as a church are being challenged. As Christians we must ask: is this of God? I have had a variety of experiences with gay and lesbian Christians which have convinced me that God is at work in changing attitudes about sexual orientation. There are many who have been convinced. The last several meetings of the General Council, each made up of equal representation of lay people and ordered ministers from all parts of Canada,

have moved our church toward acknowledging that our sexual orientation, whether to those of the same or the opposite sex, is an integral part of who we are, a mysterious gift from God rather than something unclean or disordered. The General Councils, never unanimously, but prayerfully and with much discussion, have moved to advocate for marriage for same-gender couples. Not all churches have come to these conclusions although in all the mainline churches of North America and Europe, the questions are being asked. Change within mainline churches is taking place.

Discerning God's movement was not obvious to everyone in the early church and it is not obvious today. We – including me, perhaps most of all - need to be deeply humble as we listen for God's direction. Yet we share the belief that God is active in our world. God can say, as Isaiah witnesses: "Watch. I am doing a new thing!" God can say, as Peter witnesses: "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." (Acts 10: 15) I invite us all to hold these biblical verses and this story from the early church in our hearts as we consider the question we face today: Who is family?

A final word to those of you who have family members who are gay or lesbian: these people you love are people God loves. There is no need for shame. Many have already been baptized into the death and risen life of Jesus Christ. They are part of the church family already, although many remain in exile from the church. But things are changing. Conventions and traditions that oppress people cannot hinder God when God hears their cries and moves to liberate.

Rev. Diane Blanchard  
Carlisle and Kilbride United Churches