

Message: June 7, 2020

Family Sunday: Creative Connections & the Inescapable Network of Mutuality

When I planning for this worship service, I questioned how I was going to led a Family Sunday, when we cannot even be together. I wanted to talk about intergenerational relationships. I wanted to talk about how we are all connected, how the church is a big family. I felt defeated, thinking this service would not come together virtually. Then I remembered the song you just heard. A few months ago, during our pre-pandemic children's time, Julia taught the kids of our congregation an African Spiritual. She had explained to the kids how that song helped her through scary times, and that they too, could sing it to help them through scary times. And at night, my 4 year old sings it. He adds a few extra 'amens' and he does it in whisper voice and also in scary monster voice, but he sings it right after we pray together. Sometimes the song, alone, is our prayer. So most nights, I think of Julia, and her voice, her encouragement and love seep into my life, even from a distance. So I guess today, even though we are not together, we are connected. We do maintain intergenerational relationships. Our church is still a big family.

Believe it or not, we aren't the only followers of Jesus who have experienced this kind of physical separation from a beloved church family. Rewind to New Testament and we encounter the Apostle Paul and his many prison epistles written to churches while he was in jail or under a two year house arrest. Yes, Paul wrote while under house arrest for two years. He was at stuck at home guarded inside, separated from his beloved church community. Why was Paul under house arrest? The short of it is that Paul was a nuisance to the current societal norms.

Acts 24 says it this way: "Here are the facts: this man is a disease to the body politic. He agitates trouble in Jewish communities throughout our empire as a ringleader of the *heretical* sect known as the Nazarenes. He even tried to desecrate the temple, so we seized him."

He was at work sharing the beautiful, freeing gospel of Jesus and with that came work came the retaliation of the empire. They liked their status quo and wanted Paul to stop disrupting the norm.

In Philippians chapter 1, we see how Paul creatively connects with his church family despite being imprisoned. He writes to the beloved church of Philippi these words:

(The Voice)

"Whenever you cross my mind, I thank my God for you *and for the gift of knowing you*. My spirit is lightened with joy whenever I pray for you (and I do constantly) because you have partnered with me to spread the gospel since the first day *I preached to you*. I am confident that the Creator, who has begun such a great work among you, will *not stop in mid-design but will keep perfecting you until the day Jesus the Anointed, our Liberating King, returns to redeem the world*. It is only right that I should feel such admiration for you all—you hold me close to your hearts. And, since we are partners in *this great work of grace*, you have never failed to stand with me as I have defended and stood firm for the gospel—even from this prison cell. Before God I

want you to know how much I long to see you and love you with the affection of the Anointed One, Jesus.”

In this letter Paul creatively connects with the church at Philippi. He thanks God for the Philippians, he remembers their time together, he encourages and admires them. Even though he longed to see them, he knows they are connected in love.

We have done the same in our church family. We may not be writing letters to one another (or maybe some of you are writing letters), but we may be texting one another. We continue to pray for each other. We encourage each other through phone calls. We have blessed our 4th graders through Bibles and our seniors with blankets knit with love and words of affirmations that will last a lifetime. We’ve shared in experiences together as a church family. Those experiences have created memories that will stay with us in all we do. We continue to work diligently at being a creatively connected church family, despite our distance.

But our creative call to be family does not end with our local church body. I’m going to read to you part of another letter written by another pastor while he, too, was imprisoned. He writes:

“But more basically, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their "thus saith the Lord" far beyond the boundaries of their home towns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to the far corners of the Greco Roman world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my own home town. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. ***We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality***, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. Never again can we afford to live with the narrow, provincial "outside agitator" idea. Anyone who lives inside the United States can never be considered an outsider anywhere within its bounds.”

Some of you may recognize this letter written by the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King Jr while he was jailed for peacefully protesting segregation in Birmingham Alabama, just 57 years ago.

Dr. King recognized the interconnectedness we all possess the truth that — ***We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality***. The good news of Jesus, of God’s social, racial and economic justice was not just for DR King’s church family or his hometown, but just like the apostle Paul also knew, this gospel Jesus’ extends to all.

I almost scrapped Family Sunday. Since the murder of George Floyd, I have been unable to sleep. I’ve become disillusioned AGAIN by the words of many evangelical “christian” church leaders who focus on order and respect more than murder and oppression. I’m deeply

heartbroken by the followers of Christ who remain silent. No, I can't do family Sunday now, I thought.

I called Susan Boyer our senior pastor on Monday morning ready to throw away Family Sunday all together. And yet, I didn't want to postpone blessing our seniors and recognizing our beloved 4th graders. I wrestled with what to do. And I ended up rewriting this message and as I began rewriting it, I realized that maybe, just maybe this week was actually the exact right week to reflect on the family of God. Because we are the family of God and humanity is part of the family of God. ***We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.*** And it may have taken the word family to remind me of that.

Two letters by two spiritual leaders, still relevant today. Because the family of God extends well beyond our congregation at the La Verne CoB. It extends to those experiencing homelessness at the Hope for Home Homeless Shelter. It extends to those seeking asylum, refuge, in the United States. It extends to all of humanity of all colors, creeds, genders, and sexual orientations. It extends to our siblings who have been dealing with systemic racism in the United States for generations. It extends to the oppressed of the past and present. The family of God includes Emmitt Till. It includes Breonna Taylor, Jordan Davis, Jonathan Ferrell, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Ahmaud Arbery, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, George Floyd. The family of God includes the unnamed, the statistics. **We are all God's family.**

God's family extends to all of creation, including every person impacted and pained by any form of injustice. And so, I ask you, my dear La Verne Church of the Brethren and even broader, my dear universal church, how are we to be family to one another? How are we to creatively connect, not only to our immediate church body, but to those who experience the deep pain of injustice caused by embedded, systemic racism? How can we advocate for our family, for God's family, for humanity?

I don't have a nice, clean answer for those questions. I don't. WE will have to gather round the family dinner table and work at these questions, listen, share and listen some more. And it won't stop there. We can't just sit around the table and talk. We can't just create a social media post and call it a day. We will have to get up from that table, we will have to ACT, together, as a family.

And now a benediction:

Now my dear family of God, go. Go listen. Go learn. Go creatively speak your voice of truth, in love. Go, like Paul, like Dr. King, and share (advocate) the liberating, freeing, gospel of Jesus for all of humanity. Go remembering that what impacts one of us, impacts us all. Amen.

