

The Household of Faith

(Series: What does it mean to be a member of the Church in the 21st Century?)

In our human experience, there are insiders and outsiders. You know what it's like to be an insider, right? I'm guessing the majority of you sitting here this morning are thrilled that the Rangers are first. Except for Ben the lone Yankees fan here today.

We know what it's like to feel like an insider early on in life. As babies and then children we learn what it means to be loved, welcomed, and to belong within our family. There are routines and rituals that create a sense of belonging and safety in a family.

My spouse Peter and I are trying to teach our 10 month old daughter about routines. We have a morning routine of waking up, changing her, feeding her, playing, and then singing and praying before we pop her in the car for daycare. We also have a bedtime routine. We learned after a couple of rough months of a sleep regression that babies settle down with cues, doing things in the same order at the same time every single night. This repetition allows a baby to fall asleep and to begin to sleep deeply and regularly. Change one thing, and sleep shifts. So, we try to do the same things in the same order each day so that she'll grow up knowing our safety and love. We're helping our baby girl to belong, to feel like an insider. We want her to know that she belongs, and she is safe and loved.

Last Sunday Ben and I kicked off our Sunday School class and sermon series. In Sunday School we looked at the topic, do you have to join a church to follow Jesus? We started with obstacles to joining the church, or reasons why people leave. We had to shut down that part of the conversation and Ben stopped writing on the white board, because the list was so long. One theme that emerged was hypocrisy, judgment, and exclusion. That's not a new reality.

From the early church onward Christians struggle mightily to welcome and include. Church history reminds us that people that would rather split off, or even kill one another in the name of their particular interpretation of the Gospel that live united. Christianity in Ireland as you all know has been contentious and violent. Protestants and Catholics have not enjoyed the same warm relationship that we have with our friends at St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church up the road. Violence raged in towns, among families over the differences in faith. Peace eventually came, but only within my lifetime.

The Irish theologian Siobhan Garrigan decided to research the process of peace and reconciliation in Ireland and wrote a book called *The Real Peace Process*.¹ In the book she explores how worship and Christian community were a source of the violence and division, and how worship can become a place of transformation moving folks past their sectarianism.

She tells a story of arriving at a Presbyterian church in Northern Ireland, and Siobhan was pleased to be greeted at the door by two women, church members, who invited her into their conversation.

She realized that these women were ushers of some sort, whose job it was to stand at the door of the church and interview newcomers as they arrived. They quietly asked her name, and the first names of any other approaching strangers who wished to come in to worship.

Siobhan realized what was happening. This was not a friendly greeting. Hearing the different names, the ushers would draw conclusions about the cultural and religious identity of each. Those with Protestant names were welcomed warmly and shown their seats. Those with apparently Catholic names, the Marias and Catherines and the Patricks, were told that they were surely in the wrong church and sent on their way.

¹Garrigan, Siobhan *The Real Peace Process: Worship, Politics, and the end of Sectarianism*. Equinox Press (UK), 2010.

As I read this story I assumed it was something from the height of the Irish Catholic war in the 80's or even 90's...no, apparently Siobhan did her research just a couple of years ago, and it was commonplace then...in 2010.²

Insiders and outsiders. That's the issue at the crux of our text today.

Ephesians was written to challenge those distinctions of who is in and who is out. Written to a broad community in Asia Minor, Ephesians is not like other letters. It reads more like a sermon, hitting home the theme of what it means to be the church in a pluralistic culture. You see, divisions were forming within the church and in the rest of society. In the church, the Gentiles thought they were superior and were quick to disown the Jewish roots of Paul and of Jesus. In society, the Roman Empire was growing, conquering. Citizenship in the Roman empire was not a given for everyone, and it was highly prized. So much so that those who were conquered by the Romans paid large sums of money for citizenship, to be deemed an insider rather than an alien.³ Allegiance to the Empire defined a person, and one's identity came from their citizenship.

This entire letter, and this section in particular was in the words of Dr. Sally Brown "meant to shake empires. Ephesians 2:11-22 directly challenges the swaggering claims of Rome's emperors...it undermines all the systems that secure insider distinction and top-down privilege by setting up barriers that identify someone as outsider or inferior."

Yet, oh how quickly we forget our outsider status. The Gentiles, newly adopted into the family of God have become self-righteous. These new believers were forgetting their outsider past, disconnected from an understanding of God who adopted them, and in the present they were defining themselves by their culture, the Roman Empire, forgetting the ethic set forth by Jesus. They forgot the fact that Jesus was a threat to the Empire and status quo, which got him killed.

² Story originally read in Feasting on the Word commentary on Matthew 10, pages 188-189.

³ Sally Brown commentary on text. Acts 22:25-28.

The entire letter builds a case for living faith mindful of the past...deliverance of Israel from slavery, the ethical code set forth in the Torah, the subversive life and death of Christ, as well as the present and future challenge to follow Christ in a changing world.

Verses 11-13 then are written with that context in mind. Taking language from the public sphere of the Empire, the writer condemns the Gentiles. “Remember, you were at one time...aliens and strangers to the covenant of the promise...But now in Christ you have been brought near...” Put another way; remember, you Gentiles are Christ’s, and so are your Jewish brothers and sisters.

The text goes on to proclaim that there can be unity without uniformity. Walls that have been constructed are torn down by the peace of Christ. It turns out Christ was and is powerful enough to “reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, putting to death the hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to you who were near.”

Do you believe that Christ brings a peace that brings together disparate groups and allows them to live together in one household? Is that possible?

Some of us in Tuesday morning Bible study really wrestled with that question of what it means for Christ to unite us. The news of the Syrian refugee crisis is growing dire. This past week barbed wire fences went up in Hungary. Our brothers and sisters in Europe are not alone in their struggle to welcome without hostility. We struggle with that here too. We know it’s our calling, but we also know it takes a commitment and hard work to welcome others as we would family or a fellow citizen. It’s much easier to take away a person’s humanity and identity as a child of God and categorize them as illegal or somehow less than you as politicians are prone to do.

Paul knows this struggle to welcome and include across divisions well, which is why I think he uses the metaphor of citizens and households. Two images that carry weight. Paul also knows it is easy to forget that identity. Daily life in the world chips away at that identity.

The Israelites also had a similar struggle. They continually forgot they were God's chosen people, even though God was very close and tangible to them. The book of Joshua is all about the Israelites, outsiders, becoming insiders as they cross into Caanan, the Promised Land. They are outsiders who have wandered in exile for 40 years. An entire generation has been raised on the move, with no permanent home.

They are ready to embark on a new start. Joshua leads by sharing that he and his household will serve the Lord... They are grounded in that identity. Joshua knows that in order to remember one's identity, to feel a sense of belonging, that remembering has to start at home, in the household, and continue to the larger community.

Like the Israelites and the early Christians we too forget that. But, we remember our identity when we are gathered together as the body of Christ here at church.

Later on this morning we will celebrate the Baptism of Ali Barnard. As Ben marks her with the sign of the cross, remember your own Baptism.

Remember that you too are a beloved child of God. Remember that no matter what is going on in your life or in the world, that you are part of the household of God.

Today we will make promises to help Scott and Cory raise Ali in the faith. You will promise to love her and support her in her faith because you have known God's grace, and you will help to teach her about this grace. I hope you'll try to keep those promises not only to Ali, but also in your family and in your life of faith.

In order to keep those promises we have to show up. We have to participate in the household of God. Keeping promises and remembering who we are requires some routines, some rhythms. Just like those routines and rhythms I have with my 10 month old daughter.

Each morning I say the same prayer with her, each evening we sing the same doxology, and read her the same prayers. It's boring and rote even, but that's how we teach our babies and children, right...repetition and consistency.

And that routine, rhythm, daily and weekly commitment to something is not the way of our modern world. It's not sexy. It doesn't sell. It is so very counter cultural, and hard to do.

Raising a child in the Christian faith is hard to do. It's always been hard to do as we learned in our Scripture lessons today.

The writer Anne Lamott shares this struggle to raise her 7 year old son Sam as a Christian in her book *Traveling Mercies*. She writes, "Sam is the only kid he knows who goes to church – who is make to go to church two or three times a month. He never wants to go. What young boy would rather be in church on the weekends than with hanging out with a friend."⁴

"I make him because I can, but that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world, which is to say a parth and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people in community. They pray and practice their faith."

Anne stuck to this, even when Sam grew up and was a teenager. She wrote a follow-up about making her teenage son go to church, "We live in bewildering times and a little spiritual guidance never hurt anyone. Besides, left on their own, teenagers would op of of many important things they don't enjoy like homework or flossing their teeth. It's good to do uncomfortable things. It's weight training for life...God also loves teenagers who don't go to church, but such teenagers are deprived of seeing people who love God back."⁵

⁴Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*. Page 99

⁵http://www.upcch.org/news/sermons-baptized_life.html#_ftnref5. I googled looking for quote about Anne Lamott and taking Sam to church, and happened upon this sermon with the quote. The original quote was in the August 23, 2003 issue of the Christian Century.

Coming to church for worship and Sunday School might be uncomfortable. This church is not perfect. But, the world we live in is tough. It's filled with competition and with folks yelling and manipulating you to tell you that you're not enough, and that you're an outsider.

We forget that we are insiders, that we belong to a God who is gracious and loving. God sees all of us as beloved children.

So, as we make promises vows today maybe we can also reaffirm our commitment to helping one another see who they are and whose they are as a child of God.

Now, doesn't that sound like churchy language? What does that mean? Maybe you've not tried Sunday School. I invite you to try it. Some amazing adults in our congregation have answered the call to teach our children and adults this year. Cynthia, our Director of Children and Family Ministries is trying some new things with a gathering time for children, mission projects, and children's Sabbath. Maybe you're busy and stretched thin that you can't even think straight. Try the evening prayer service next Sunday at 7pm. Maybe you're not so sure about God. Share your questions or your struggles about faith and life in a class, with someone in the narthex after worship, or with Ben or myself.

We don't have it all figured out, and we are not all perfect.

God knows we need this community and these strange and counter cultural regular practices like worship, prayer, Bible Study, and fellowship to begin to see this love of God who brings us all together in spite of ourselves.

In the name of the Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of us all. Amen.