

Sermon by Pastor Renata Eustis

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Pentecost 3A 2017

Matthew 10: 24-39

This is one of those weeks when it takes some faith to read the Gospel and proclaim at the end that it is indeed the “Gospel of the Lord.” Because you probably know that “gospel” means “good news” and a lot of what we heard in this part of Matthew—to be perfectly honest—does not sound all that good.

Jesus talks about bringing a sword instead of peace—that sword is a sword of judgment and division that is going to pit family members against each other.

What’s Jesus got against families? These words of Jesus don’t sound very loving. When it comes right down to it, what Jesus says doesn’t sound very *Christian*.

I will never forget the first time I preached on this text because it just happened to be the lectionary reading the first time my mother-in-law heard me preach. I thought it was a cruel twist of lectionary fate.

But as hard as it is for us to deal with these words of Jesus, the truth is that it was even harder for the people who first heard them. Families are super important to us now but in Jesus’s time, *they were everything*. Your family of origin was what defined your entire life. You owed them ultimate loyalty and love—above everyone and everything else. And love was not so much a feeling as an action—specifically, loving your family meant being attached to your family. This is your group—nothing comes between you and your family. Your status is determined by your family’s status. You don’t really exist as an individual. You exist as a member of a family.

So what Jesus *says* is not so much the problem. The real problem is what he’s been *doing*. This talk about pitting family members against each other is in the middle of a talk Jesus is giving about discipleship—about what it means to follow him. Pitting family members against each other is not the goal; it’s what happens when you follow Jesus.

Jesus is bringing together a new family—a surrogate family—that’s what was going on for the first disciples. They were actually leaving their families—not abandoning their families literally but forming another primary loyalty and this was wreaking a lot of havoc. Following Jesus is not a hobby or something they work into their schedule. It is something that has turned their lives upside down.

The big problem with this new surrogate family—this community of disciples—is that it is bringing together people of different social and economic classes, people with different levels of education, people from different families. This is a big issue—especially for those disciples who come from the top of the social ladder. They are now closely associating with the “wrong kind of people” and they risk being cut off by the families they were born into.

Jesus has made it clear that being part of this new family is not an incidental or optional part of following him. This new family is a prototype of where God is heading with all of humanity. Just like Jesus is the in-the-flesh expression of who God is, the community of disciples—dare we say “the church”—is the in-the-flesh expression of what God wants for all of

God's people. God wants us to walk past everything that divides us and discover that we belong to each other in Christ.

I want to shift to what Jesus says just before all this family talk. He says: "Everyone who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven."

I find that word "acknowledge" interesting because it's a word we don't use all that much. So over the last couple of weeks, I've been listening for how we use that word. The most common is acknowledging that you made a mistake or that someone else was right. It is basically about admitting.

But there is another use that has to do with claiming someone—claiming a child as yours. A father who's not married to the mother of his child *acknowledges* his son or daughter. This man admits that he is the father but it's more than that. This is a public recognition of the child—saying to the community, "this is my child." And saying to the child, "you are mine." "It's not a mystery who your father is—you belong to me."

There is a deep, deep desire in us to belong—and lots of things that make us question our belonging.

You know our family—we've got two white parents, one Chinese daughter and two African-American daughters. *You* know we belong to each other but "out there" we each have fairly frequent experiences of people judging us and coming to the conclusion that we don't belong together because we don't look alike. I'm pretty tough now but the questions and the silent judgments and assumptions take a toll. And I know it's been even harder for our kids. There's a nagging sense of having to prove yourself—of justifying that you belong—in a way that others don't have to.

No matter what kind of family we come from, we all have this very deep desire to belong—to know in the depths our being that there is nothing that could threaten our status as a beloved child or brother or sister. To know that there is no throwing us out—that there is no possibility that we could be cut off.

And let's face it, there is a lot of brokenness in our families. Some of us here today are cut off from people we used to be close to, people we loved, people we have shared history with, people we thought we'd belong to for the rest of our lives. So, we know, as much as we might wish otherwise, there is a tenuousness to our belonging—and that is hard.

But with God it is a different story. There is nothing tenuous about God's love for each and every one of us. God publicly acknowledges us—publicly claims us as a beloved child—in our baptisms. But the *love* that God has for us has no beginning or end.

Just like baptism is the public acknowledgement of our belonging to God, there was a moment when a judge publicly acknowledged that we were legally, our daughter, May's, parents. But claiming May as our child happened well before that moment in the courtroom.

I remember it like it was yesterday. May was a newborn and she slept a lot. But finally, she opened her eyes and looked at me—and, for me, that was it. At the time there had been a couple of high profile cases of birth fathers coming forward after adoptions, and being given custody. I remember thinking, "If that happens, we are going to Australia. It's too bad I spent

all this time going to seminary to be a pastor and I will miss our families and friends but no one is taking this baby from me. If it takes being a fugitive, well that's just the way it is."

There was nothing tenuous about May belonging to us.

And there is nothing tenuous about us belonging to God.

There's a lot about the cross that is very hard for me to understand but the one thing that is clear to me is the fierceness of God's love for us. Because, even before our baptisms, this is the place where God really acknowledges us. On the cross, God says, with the fiercest of loves, "You are my children and I will do *anything* to be close to you. You belong to me."

So, it starts—always—with God acknowledging us.

But we acknowledge God, too. We say—with our words and our actions—that God has a claim on us, that we belong to God. We share what we have heard in the dark, "You belong." "You *all* belong." Because there are so many people who haven't heard those words—or haven't been able to believe them.

They haven't been able to believe those words because there have been so many other messages that fly in the face of those words of belonging.

Just a couple of days ago, I used the Pastor's Discretionary Fund to help a woman named Claire pay her rent in a rooming house, so she and her 3-year-old daughter who has leukemia wouldn't be evicted. On the one hand, I was angry at how inadequate our social safety net is—and I was angry at the landlord, and I told the landlord I thought she was harsh.

But Claire's response when I told her I was sending the check to the landlord made me realize how important it was that we were helping her *as the church*. She told me she'd been calling around to different churches, desperately trying to get help—and now she had a burden lifted that was really pressing down on her.

Someone had listened and acknowledged her. And I think it really matters that we did this as the church—because when we acknowledge her, we say that God acknowledges her.

And, at the same time, we acknowledge God. We acknowledge God every time we make known to others that they belong—whether it be through directly responding to their needs or advocating for policies and budgets that do that. We acknowledge that, in Christ, we all belong to God and to each other.

So, it turns out that Jesus is not against families after all. He's just showing us we're all in the same one. Thanks be to God. Amen