

Sunday, May 14, 2023
Rideau Park United Church – Elizabeth Bryce

Reading: Roman 5:1-5

Sermon: The grace in which we stand (Christian Family Sunday)

Once upon a time, there was a man who was at home with his two children. He hoped that he could spend the day sitting in his armchair, and really get into the book he had just picked up at the library. But the kids were being noisy, it was raining outdoors and they were stuck in the house. The kids were bored and restless. It seemed like every five minutes, one of them would run into something or a fight would break out, and the man would have to put down his book and intervene.

Finally, he saw a magazine on the coffee table, open to the centre fold, which showed a map of the world. And he had an idea! He pulled the centre fold out from the magazine, took a pair of scissors and cut it into about a hundred little pieces. Then he mixed them all up, and put them in a pile on the floor, like the pieces of a puzzle. He was sure his kids were too young to know much geography and so he thought to himself that it would take them quite a while to figure it all out.

So he set them to the task of fixing the map and sticking it all together with tape, while he sat down to delve into his book. Imagine his amazement when, not fifteen minutes later, they were standing in front of him, proud of their success putting the map of the world back together.

“How did you do that?” he asked them, secretly hoping his kids were geniuses after all. “You were so fast!!”

“Oh it was easy” said his son, “You told us it was a map of the world, and when we looked at the pieces we found it so hard.”

“But then we looked at the back of the pieces” said his daughter “And there were pictures of two families – one playing outside and one eating dinner inside. So we put the families back together, taped them together, and flipped them over and the map of the world was perfect.”

“You see, Dad,” said her brother “It’s actually easy. If then families are okay, then the whole world is okay too.”

I like to think the dad put his book away for the rest of the day, and found something to do with his kids because, as it turned out, they were geniuses after all.

In the life of the church, we call this day Christian Family Sunday. In part because it is Mother’s Day, and we celebrate the good nurturing that can happen in families, Christian or otherwise. We are also aware that there are children who have lost their

mothers, and mothers who have lost their children, and it can be a day that is painful as well as joyful. We call it Christian Family Sunday not with the expectation that Christians have better families than anyone else, because we don't. But we hope that, in faith community, we can be like family to one another: we can be trusting like a child, nurturing like a mother, and sustained by God who is like a holy parent for one and all.

So if you turn the world upside down, maybe you will find people of faith being family to one another, and to their neighbours, and to the newcomers – the we might somehow mend the world – which needs it so much.

Diana Butler Bass is an American sociologist and theologian who studies how religion shifts and changes over time, and also how religious people change the world around them.

She has written that “home” is a central theme in most of the world's great religions. In Jewish faith there is a promised land where God has placed the people to be safe and free. Christian faiths proclaim that God has made a home in our hearts. Muslims turn toward Mecca, their spiritual home, to pray. Buddhists make their home in enlightenment and meditation. Druids and Wiccans worship God who makes a home in creation – in trees and land and oceans.

And then we build churches and temples, gudwaras and mosques, synagogues and cathedrals and we call them “the house of God,” when we really know that God could never be contained in any building, or even any faith. We build the special buildings to shelter our prayers, and mark special historic moments with shrines, we bury our dead or float or burn their bodies in the hope that their spirits “freed” might find their way back to God.

So the narrative arc of the Bible is really a diversity of peoples in various places, searching for home and finding it in our own hearts. God not only creates our earthly home, God is our home. And we are God's home too.

And the story keeps us searching, our houses of faith are not museums – and the stories of faith are passed on to the next generation. They change and adapt it and make it their own story, their own spiritual home – though it never stays one way for long.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we have the apostle Paul, a Jewish man from Tarsus, in what we know today as Turkey. He was writing in the Greek language, from Corinth in Greece, to Rome in Italy. He is writing to tell them that he is coming to them – so then he will be living in Rome, writing to the church in Greece and Palestine and Turkey. Where was home for Paul? Where was his family?

Paul's home and his family were wherever he found himself supported and serving with other followers of Jesus. Over and over again, he called his co-workers brother and sister, son and daughter. Today we would call it a “chosen family” – the place where we

feel accepted the way we are and don't have to battle other people's expectations of the role we were assigned.

In the Bible, family values encompass a wide variety of household arrangements and relationships.

I have to chuckle when people start going on about Christian family values, because the Bible (our sacred text) includes an unmarried naked couple cohabiting in a garden, polygamous patriarchs and despotic kings with large harems, women who trapped men into marriage or fatherhood because it was the only way they could survive, not to mention the possibly unmarried rabbi Jesus (son of a teen-aged unwed mother) who urged his followers to leave their fathers and mothers in order to follow him.

Jesus' followers, including the apostle Paul, made a great deal of trouble because they redefined the structures of a family "home" to include decision making by women and slaves, and they upset the traditional Roman family everywhere they went. Christians chose not to mark marriages with a state sanctioned ceremony, instead having their unions blessed by faith leaders. Some avoided marriage completely, opting instead to live with their spiritual brothers and sisters in shared houses. When Roman law encoded expectations and responsibilities for household members, followers of Jesus rejected them, finding their home in God alone.

In fact, when you look at today's chosen families: the complexity and theological messiness of "home" or "family" in our own time is much more like what our ancestors experienced in biblical times than most anything preached as Christian family values in a fundamentalist church today.

It wasn't an easy path to choose. In Paul's letter to the Romans he told them that what they considered faithfully chosen family life would lead to social persecution and suffering. But he also reminded them that *we may boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, ⁴and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, ⁵and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*

Paul insisted that the followers of Jesus' way should feel secure regardless of how the world treated them because they were living the way of love, compassion, blessing, equity and grace. *"This grace in which we stand"* as Paul said, was the only shelter they really needed. It might not have walls and doorways or a two-car garage, but it was the key needed to live and prosper in community with others.

God dwells with us, and we dwell in God's presence. In Judaism, one way of referring to God is *shekhinah*, meaning the settling in of the Divine Presence. It is also a word that also is used to describe the nesting of birds, which is a lovely creation image.

In traditional Christian teaching, Jesus is the Son of God, the human form of the Divine One, who was made incarnate through Mary, and born into the world. Whether one believes in the immaculate conception, I think, is less important than whether or not we

see in Jesus embodying both - the human and the holy – the physical and the spiritual – the time-limited and the eternal. Because if Jesus can embody this for us, then we can also embody it for others.

I have a friend who adopted a child, and whenever he discusses something that happened with his son, he will often say something like: “I have no idea where he gets that from, that must be nature!” or the next time he will exclaim “Chalk one up for nurture – he definitely gets it from me (or his mother.)”

Living in family, whether biological or chosen, whether residential or in faith community, it affects us. We are influential one to another. We rub off on each other. That is why we seek to live the very best choices we can – so that nurturing faith and justice will just come naturally to our family, our neighbours, our community. Our next hymn talks about Jesus inheriting his values from his mother Mary of Nazareth. Whether it be nature or nurture, we too are part of that legacy. Thanks be to God.