

Sunday, July 6th, 2008
The 14th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Romans 8:9-25, Luke 3:7-17
God's Paternity Test

As the summer wedding season is now in full swing, I get to spend lots of time talking with various couples about their plans. And we sit in my office, or at their home, and I see the couple looking at each other with those puppy dog love eyes and they're holding hands and everything is wonderful and sweet and perfect and all is happiness and light.

And then we start talking. And we talk about families – their families. And the smiles often start to drop off of their faces. We talk about their definition of family – close or extended. You have how many people over for a small family gathering? Wait, you family celebrates Christmas how? You open presents on Christmas eve? Great Uncle John is considered “close” family? And slowly, we start to turn the conversation to something different, to what kind of family will the two of you have together.

And this is where you see the couple turn, look at each other, and realize that being married is more than surviving the wedding. And for us, as Christians, this is when we realize that being Christians is about more than the baptism. And yet, both are about being family.

For if we are honest, while marriage quite often changes our sense of identity and relationship – from being a person's child to being a person's spouse – baptism reveals that we are accepting, acknowledging and committing to an already existing relationship – that we are the children of God.

Paul would assert that in our baptisms, as we become one with Christ, we take on the relationship of the Son to the Father, so that we, like Christ, are able and allowed to speak to God as a parent, as an intimate, personal relationship, not as a distant and impersonal relationship.

And in this relationship, this new relationship, different as I'm sure Paul would assert from other relationship with God or with other gods as understood in other times and places, is that if we are God's children, if we are a part of God's family, then we are also heirs to the kingdom. And for a moment, let's take that out another step. If we are heirs, if God's kingdom is not just God's kingdom, but also is to be our kingdom, then perhaps, just perhaps we should be interested in its maintenance and in its glory. If we are heirs, then do we not have a stake in the kingdom now as well as in the future? Just as if we are a part of the family, don't we have a stake and a say in how the family both is and is to be?

And that brings us to Luke's account of John the Baptist's hissy fit. I probably shouldn't describe it that way, as I've been known to want to say the same sort of thing and even, on occasion to say those sorts of things, but, nonetheless, it is what it is. John has a crowd of people who are coming to him to be baptized in the wilderness, and John, like most pastors, has a hunch that most or many of them are not there for the right reasons or do not understand the ramifications of such a thing as they are in line to get involved with.

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John's imagery is graphic – God could cut down that family tree of Abraham and make descendant of the rocks. And this is a very serious threat to the Jews of that day, but it should also be a serious threat to us. But, at the same time, we are those descendants raised up from the rocks who have been grafted into God's family tree. For us, this passage should be poignant. And it should be poignant because of John's commands in the name of God.

For we are the people who have heard the Word, and who have asked what we should do. Like the tax collectors, we should take no more than what is proscribed for us, like the soldiers, we must not use power and threats and lies to get more than what we have, and we should be satisfied with our own wages. We should. We don't but we should.

For this is where the final piece of family falls into place. Because family is about more than genetics. It is about more than biology. Family is who you make of it. When you walk down the aisle, or your siblings do, how with the family be changed by the person who comes into it? Will they ever truly be family, or is that reserved for blood? Can't you see some family resemblances in how people talk or face the world, or deal with conflict, or deal with loss?

Shouldn't those things apply to God's family as well? John the Baptist and Paul and I all think that we should be able to see something in each other – if we weren't spread apart by 2000 years – that would allow us to recognize the family in one another. And that is about how we act, how we are, how we treat one another more than it is about lineage. It is about acting as though we are heirs of the kingdom and want to inherit God's kingdom in all of its glory and not just be happy to get in.

So what does God's paternity test look like? It isn't about DNA. It is about how we are together. It is about how we welcome newer members of the family. It is about how we share, how we worship, and how we serve. It is about how we recognize the family resemblance in others, and how it is recognized in us.

And so, in wedding season, I bid you welcome again to God's family. Look around – can't you see the family resemblance?