

“Family Values”
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
The First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan -June 6, 2021

Please Read:
Genesis 3:8-15
Mark 3:20-35

For a while in Paris, we had a chef at the American Church in Paris we'll call Pierre, and he and his partner Fabien and Kim and I became friends. They invited us to a special reception at the *Hotel de Ville* hosted by Anne Hidalgo, the mayor of Paris. So Kim and I got dressed up and went to the party. We climbed the many heavily carpeted steps to one of the grand ballrooms and as we entered through the twenty-foot doorway, immediately sensed we were in a lively gala affair. In fact, we were some of the few straights in a room with hundreds of joyful guests. We got our champagne and started walking around trying to spot our friends and admiring the paintings and massive chandeliers.

And then I heard someone calling my name, “Scott...” I turned around and a man who looked only vaguely familiar came toward me asking, “Are you Scott Herr?” He said, “I’m Rodrigo, and I was in your youth group at the Union Church Mexico City.” I hadn’t seen Rodrigo since 1993 when Kim and I left for Zurich. I was astonished that he recognized me. I like to think I haven’t changed that much, but well, you know... We all age a bit right. Less here and more there!

Anyway, Rodrigo introduced me to his husband Eric, and we learned about their marriage, and how they adopted a daughter Pilar and were raising her in Los Angeles and looking to buy a flat in Paris. Rodrigo is an interior designer for stars like John Mayer and doing very well. In the coming years when they came into town, they would come and worship with us.

It struck me that here is a wonderful example of a new kind of family that hardly fits the traditional stereotype of “family,” but who are a couple who love one another and are raising a beautiful daughter. I guess it’s a real-life version of *Modern Family*, right? And in getting to know Rodrigo and his story, I learned why he moved from Mexico City to Los Angeles, and how this beautiful family has only a very few choices of where they can go and be truly at ease, welcomed and acknowledged as a legitimate family. In too many churches they wouldn’t feel welcome, and in some cities they literally wouldn’t be safe to live and work and go about their lives...

In our gospel text today, Jesus redefines family around the values of his Kingdom, the new reign that emerges from God’s self-giving love, from compassion and acceptance of the outsiders, the vulnerable and the marginalized. And for this, Jesus is accused of being Satan by some, or merely out of his mind. The gospel comes to us in the strange parable Jesus tells of the tied-up strong man, a thinly veiled reference to Jesus’ struggles with family and religious authorities.

The parable is good news not because Jesus is being nice (like you’re supposed to be in a family) or because Jesus is respecting the authorities (like you’re supposed to do when you’re from Galilee and the Roman patsies march in from the Jerusalem home office).

It is gospel because it portrays Jesus himself in the struggle for God's coming reign. You all know that the Greek word for gospel "euangelion", is not just a New Testament word, but goes back to secular Hellenistic culture. Mark commentator Eugene Boring even describes gospel as "good news from the battlefield."¹

The good news, you see, is that Jesus was "in the struggle" to embody, to make real the good news of the gospel, and he will not be bound. His house will not be plundered. The good news is that God is not far off and disengaged, but already mixing it up, "in the struggle" for what is good and true and beautiful, for what is just and fair. It makes me think of Paul's question, "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

There is a beautiful grace in the notion that God, and in this text God's divine agent, Jesus, is not pleased that people are in bondage, subject to illness, pushed aside to the margins of society, mired in something less than life. That's evil. Jesus struggles for what is just and healing... and I take comfort from that.

The irony is that even good institutions like family and churches have stood against the thriving of some of our most precious human beings... This is LGBTQ Month, and I think especially of how the church has struggled to offer genuine welcome and inclusion to our LGBTQ siblings, how long it took to get it right and how long it takes to continue to be reconciled...

The good news invites us into the central gospel struggle which Jesus initiated, a ministry of healing, the exorcism of exclusion, and embracing unmistakable forgiveness and love.

So, today is a day when I wanted to celebrate *Corpus Christi*... It was actually a feast day this past Thursday and that's why I asked Victoria to have Cesar Franck's beautiful piece *Panis Angelicus* sung as we receive from the table. But here's the thing. We really are the Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ when we welcome everyone around the table. The good, the bad and the ugly, the rich and the poor, the wise and the ignorant, the young and the old, the left and the right, those with whom we agree and those we don't understand...

Sarah Miles was an atheist who walked into St. Gregory's church one day during the service and was immediately overwhelmed with the presence of God. When she heard the invitation to the table, she came, knowing that she had been converted to faith in Jesus. Now, Sarah is an Episcopal priest, and as one who was hostile to the faith for years, I find her perspective on the church fascinating.

One observation she makes is that *whatever we do in the church reflects our fundamental belief about who God is*. That means everything, from how we worship, to who is up front in worship, to how we decorate the walls and the songs we sing, to how we make decisions about money or arrange the chairs in a room... it all reflects our fundamental understanding of the gospel (or lack thereof).

Probably the most important thing she learned from her experience of the church is how important welcome really is. Her pastor, Paul Fromberg, says that the way you can discern the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist is when there is somebody *completely inappropriate at the table!*

Sarah confesses, “That’s me! That’s been me many times. It may be a young child, or an older lady with cancer or a cranky guy. None of us really belong here. And yet, we do belong, because we are the people for whom God gave his son...”¹

Maybe that’s the main family value we need to remember as we prepare for the table today: we are welcome here because of grace. Grace is how we realize how much we have in common with our LGBTQ neighbors, those people, the stranger in our midst, the ones who may look different than we do and have been raised with different cultures and traditions. We need them, and they need us. Because, they are our parents, our brothers and sisters, our aunts and uncles. I think of Rodrigo and Eric and am so thankful for them and their daughter...

As we gather around the table today, may we all remember as Calvin put it, the church argues about how Christ is present at this table – and we use words like transubstantiation and consubstantiation, real presence, sacrament and ordinance... But the real mystery is how are *we* present at the table? How is it that we saints and sinners alike, are welcomed at the table? It’s all about the strange grace of God. According to Jesus, as we do the will of God, receiving and sharing God’s grace for all people, we are the Corpus Christi, the Body of Christ, the family of God for the world.

In the name of the God who created us, redeems us, and always loves us. Amen.

¹ This is from an interview that was posted by the Brehm Center of Fuller Theological Seminary for Micah Groups, referenced April 19, 2012:
www.brehmcenter.com/initiatives/ogilvieinstitute/micah_groups/topic/1576/assignment/1575/group/INTL_France_2012/curriculum/298/