

Challenge, faith and family: Adoption into the Body of Christ

(sermon by Craig E. Tenke, November 22, 2009)

Thanksgiving is a time when family relationships and traditions seem larger than life. This one marks a time of transition for this congregation, as we celebrate the long and successful path we've walked with Rev. Letizia, Carol, and their family. We know we face new challenges, and with it the hope for new growth. For my own family, this is also a time of transition, as *we* deal with absence, uncertainty, and challenge. I stand here wondering *aloud* if we can live up to the examples and standards set by those who have gone before us. At times, the selfish child that hides within me feels *abandoned*, left *alone* without the counsel and comfort of trusted voices that have joined their maker after a life well-lived. Today, I want to stop for a moment to take stock of our resources, to look past the surface of family and faith traditions, and to *confront the challenges* that families face in their journey of faith.

Just what *are* the connections between family and faith? In fact, what *is* family... the things that bind us together, that bring many of us here, that we treasure more than anything else in life?

According to Wikipedia, "Family denotes a group of people... affiliated by [common ancestry], affinity or co-residence. ...one must understand the idea of "blood" metaphorically, and that many societies understand 'family' through other concepts rather than through genetic distance. One of the primary functions of the family is to produce and reproduce persons, biologically and socially... However, ...[family roles may serve an economic role as well, being] ...necessary for the formation of an economically productive household.

The family is where all the most basic relationships are formed. These, in turn, foretell relationships with others. Families are the elements of society, in which each person has multiple roles. In each family, a unique spin develops on these roles.

Family and faith are always intertwined. From Proverbs we learn to “Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.” Deuteronomy goes even further: “And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” To this we can add, “It takes a community,” because the fellowship of the church helps to nurture and support it’s families. As Christians, we strive always to build our house upon the rock.

Families are composed of individuals, each with their own unique abilities. Jesus told a parable about three servants who were given different amounts of money, in talents, by their master to take care of. The two who were given the most used the money wisely. When the master returned, they repaid him with interest. The one who only received one talent was afraid to lose it, so after safely guarding it, he gave it back... but nothing more. Those who made their talents grow were rewarded with more money, more responsibility, and more respect. In contrast, the one who did nothing with the little that he had lost his job and had his talent taken from him. God doesn’t just *want* us to use the talents and gifts he’s given us to make them grow - he *insists!* This parable asks us to look at what we were given, and to inventory our aptitudes and disabilities. With each, there comes a challenge. Through each, we are tested.

It was long debated whether traits like intelligence were inherited by genetics, or if they came from the way that a person developed, or how they were raised. While some traits are inherited, it is now clear that the environment dominates for others, but both typically play a role. The same things are true for disabilities. In the middle east in Biblical times, disabilities and diseases were looked at as a sign of *sin*. Much of Jesus ministry involved healing and tending to the sick, the disenfranchised, and the outcast. Jesus was once asked by a disciple whether a particular man was blind because *he* had sinned, or whether it was his *parents*. Jesus later exposes their upside-down understanding of the human condition, when the authorities denied the cure and rejected the man anyway.

In another example, Jesus comments on the large charitable contributions made by the rich. When a poor widow came and put in two copper coins, he said, “Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those... For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had” [Mark 12:41-44] It seems that from a spiritual perspective, it may not always be easy to tell a liability from a gift. What may be more important is how faithfully we use what we have.

Some of our abilities are uniquely human, and lie far beyond sense and motion. *Language and reasoning* skills stand out among these, and can be a tremendous asset for maintaining and supporting a family. They’re also important for our faith, as when we’re instructed to confess Jesus Christ as Lord. The gospel of John even begins with a unique view of Christ: “In the beginning was the *Word*.” Of course, these are just metaphors for the spirit. If a neurological disability leads a person to give *confident* answers that are *completely wrong*, they certainly aren’t lies. Likewise, for a person with *Tourette’s Syndrome*, harsh or vile language may get in the way of whatever good works or intentions they have in mind. These life circumstances pose unique challenges, but are not the curses proscribed by the Torah. Conversely, the most eloquent public prayers are not necessarily the ones that God listens to [Matt.6: 5-7] Yet again, we are challenged.

Hopefulness and compassion are also gifts that are staples for family life and growth. Again, there are corresponding *disabilities* of the heart, mind and soul. Some children are afflicted from infancy, and can never emotionally bond to others. Some never seem to quite thrive, no matter how much love you give them, no matter what you do. Wanton indifference or violence to one’s self or others can follow directly from mood or thought disorders. In Biblical times, *all* of these conditions were called “demons.” Today, if you’re persistent, informed, work well with medical and legal agencies, and are also *quite* lucky, *some* may be treatable. The way that we deal with *all parties* in families affected by them continues to challenge us.

Even *more* challenging are those *culturally unacceptable* behaviors that have *legal or moral* implications. The reason is that sometimes the difference between a patient and a criminal may come down to whether an emergency decision is made to call an ambulance or the police, and that decision may differ across socioeconomic groups.

Our shared American mythos tells us that each of us makes our own destiny in this land of opportunity. “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” If you *really want it*, you only need diligence and persistence to succeed. Unfortunately, the image isn’t so appealing for poor, inner city kids who don’t seem to have as rosy an outlook. Moreover, middle class Americans have been leaving Long Island in droves since long before the current financial mess. Is it possible that those unAmerican *class* distinctions portrayed so harshly in “Les Miserables” or “Slumdog Millionaire” might somehow also affect Americans in the 21st century?

When I was in elementary school, dinosaurs were a big thing for me. I consumed books on them, I loved going to the museum, and I saved every penny for dinosaur toys and models. I remember one friend in particular who shared this passion, but we somehow lost touch. I came across him again when I was pinching azelias one summer at the local nursery, while studying for my first doctoral exams. It wasn’t that long after I had resolved my own existential crisis, so I wasn’t at all surprised to see him there, just muddling along. He didn’t have college or career aspirations of his own, but always sought out the companionship of college peers. He really had nothing in common with the laborers there, who proudly proclaimed, “We’re *migrants*, not *immigrants*!”

I was shocked a few years later to learn that he had died of an illness related to drug abuse. In those days, there was nothing in Center Moriches that remotely resembled the street culture of cities. College kids *feigned* familiarity with it, and it was romanticized and sanitized by plays like “Hair” and “Godspell.” However, the notion that “the street” was a real and seductive entity that could reach out, grab, and destroy a bright and interested peer was unimaginable to me.

As far as I knew, his family had been there for him. He had a spiritual bent, but I wasn't sure where a formal faith fit in. Aside from the career goals, a few *differences* between our lives *did* come to mind. First, there were economic differences: the blue collar that *my* father had been born into seems to have been bleached out a bit over the course of my life. Second, he was, in the parlance of the day, from the other side of the tracks. Gazing through the imperfect glass of my own understanding, it slowly dawned on me that some of us are born with risk factors that others never have. I got to thinking about another local kid who died of a drug overdose. He was a *good* kid, the older brother of a family that all consider, to this very day, to be upstanding pillars of the local black community. I couldn't even imagine him *using* drugs, even *once*. He died in Vietnam, at a time when other kids had their college deferments.

Sometimes the nature-nurture battle is to the death, but it plays out differently in each family. "Chance" unfolds on an uneven playing field, and the dice are *still* loaded by money, race, and power. Meanwhile, the problems of "the street" have inundated our landscape, and their impact has multiplied across our families and communities. The resulting emotional and moral challenges may exceed the abilities of stressed parents. In times of crisis, knowledge and diligence may not be enough. How much worse is it if no one understands, if no one seems to care?

The Bible cautions us that *even though* God is "...The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin," *he* "...will by *no means* clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation." Exod.34: 6-7

This harsh pronouncement may *really* be a simple statement of fact. *Some* problems become *transgenerational*. The abused becomes the abuser. The sociopath has no social skills to teach their children, let alone the value of honesty and hard work. Likewise, an outcast minority may *gladly nurture* malice and rage. In the emotional fog, where do the afflicted find hope? Although these *do* have moral consequences, the *challenges*, again, confront us *all*. We the family, we the community, we the church, are *all* being tested.

The Broadway show, *Wicked*, deals with some of these issues allegorically. It begins after the familiar ending of “*The wizard of Oz.*” Everyone is celebrating the death of the wicked witch of the West, singing “*No one mourns the wicked!*” But then someone asks Glenda, the good witch, “Didn’t you know her? Are people born evil, or does something in their lives change them?” The girl who would come to be called “wicked” was from a “good” family, and she was devoted to her disabled sister. She had traits that made her different from the others, including an unusually kind heart. Oz may have *seemed* like a happy-go-lucky place, but it was actually quite *cruel* to those who were different. In fact, the revered and trusted authorities had no truth or justice in them at all, and they used lies, deceit and stereotypes to control the masses.

At the end of “Wicked,” there is a kind of *redemption*. In Oz, as in America, hope *can* grow from truth, responsibility, and faithfulness in action. Good can triumph... but *only* when naive and selfish innocence is *tested through sacrifice*. The rulers must serve; the weak must become strong.

We know these themes well, because they resonate throughout the Bible. Like *Jacob*, we find ourselves *limping*, yet *truly blessed*. Over and over, God’s people are challenged and tested. In wave upon wave, they struggle and are called back to Truth. Jeremiah speaks truth to power: “Hear the word of the LORD, O King of Judah, who sits on the throne of David, you, and your servants, and your people who enter these gates... : Do justice and righteousness, and deliver from the hand of the oppressor him who has been robbed. And do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless, and the widow, nor shed innocent blood in this place.” [Jer 22:2-3]

Words are not enough, no matter how impassioned. *Challenge and hope go hand in hand*. In his letter to the Romans, Paul says, “we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God. More than that, we *rejoice* in our *sufferings*, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because *God’s love has been poured into our hearts* through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

God isn’t *above* us, but *with* us. We *share* in our relationship with Him, and must *struggle* to be faithful. *We* are the people spoken of in the Bible: the servants, the

outcasts, and the *rulers*; both the oppressed and the *oppressor*. “And what does the LORD require of us but to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God.” [Micah 6:8]

We struggle and fail and struggle again. We support and raise up. The churches are where the civil rights movement began. The churches are where cries for compassion, social justice and peace are still heard, even when no one else notices. The churches are where people come together to do *what they can to share God's love* through action, sacrifice and *hope*.

Our relationship with God has *always* been a *personal* one. The God we worship is not an uncaring elemental force or a cruel and arbitrary tyrant. Quite the contrary, we know we are cared for, as a child is tended by a just and knowing parent. Jesus taught us this in the first words of the Lord's Prayer, and he declared us family saying “... whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” [Matt 12:50]

We don't serve God out of fear, but out of devotion and love, and the *struggles of our faith are repaid in kind*. With this faith, mountains can be moved. For example, right here in this congregation, we've seen the miracle of the loaves and the fishes. Through the work of the Spirit, and by the dedication of our food pantry crew, the *idea* of a weekly food offering has become *real*, and has since been multiplied many times over.

Our adoption by God is the very undoing of social class, bloodline, and caste. As Paul put it, “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.” [Gal.3:27-29]

“...God sent forth his Son ...to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.” [Gal.4: 1-7]

The family we are adopted into is the church universal. Paul wrote, “For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function,

so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” *Our* adoption adds *our diversity* to the body, *concentrating* our gifts, and *building* from our challenges, while *we* gain hope, community and purpose.

No matter how great our challenges, we are never alone; The Lord is there for us to lean upon. We are also supported by the prayers and works of His people, through this very congregation. We draw upon, and are connected by, gifts of the spirit that span across the generations in all directions, like a wave converging from places unseen to lift us up above the dark depths.

These are the family values we celebrate, *with joy and thanksgiving!*

To God be the glory. Amen.

