



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 13
Proper 18 (C)

Family Ties

[RCL] Jeremiah 18:1-11; Psalm 139:1-5, 12-17; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

What does it mean to be family? What do we mean when we say we are part of a church family or God's family? What about when the interests of our family conflict with other things that pull on us, demand our time and energy and attention? What does love require of us? This morning, we have two readings that focus on family, and on untying and tying the ties that bind us together as family.

In 2004, the BBC reported that an 80-year-old retired teacher of Greek and Latin in Italy was seeking adoption. Widowed for 14 years and lonely, Giorgio Angelozzi placed an ad in an Italian newspaper, searching for a family willing to adopt him as a grandparent. Angelozzi was inundated with responses from throughout Italy, and from as far away as New Zealand, including from many parents who hoped that Angelozzi could teach Greek and Latin to their children; this elderly man could be useful to them. Angelozzi also offered to contribute 500 euros per month to the family that would take him in.

Angelozzi chose the Riva family, near Milan, saying that the mother had a melodious voice that reminded him of the voice of his wife. The Rivas said they hoped that the elderly man would fill a gap for their children, whose grandfather had died.

It would be a sweet story if this is where it ended: a lonely old man with a new family to love, a family with a new grandfather.

Sadly, about a year later, Angelozzi was in the news again. The family had never really bonded. Angelozzi was authoritarian, and the teenage children were more interested in computer games than spending time with the old man. He had irritating habits. He followed the mother around all day. He stuck chewing gum under the furniture. He did pay the 500 euros once, but he ran up a large bill with the family dentist after the Rivas had already paid for new glasses and an operation. When the Rivas told Angelozzi he would have to settle things with the dentist, Angelozzi skipped town. The Italian police found him in an old people's home in Milan and discovered a history of fraud, theft, bitterness, and alienation from his blood family.

Angelozzi died after being in a coma for six weeks. There had been no flowers, no cards, no phone calls, and not a single relative came to visit or claim his body after his death. A reporter found a sister of Angelozzi and informed her that her brother had died. She seemed relieved. But the Riva family asked the local authorities to organize a funeral for Angelozzi and said they would go and pay their last respects. The mother, Marlena, said, “How can we ask God for forgiveness for our sins one day if we do not pardon [Angelozzi]?”

In today’s Gospel lesson, Jesus says some harsh words related to family. “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters... cannot be my disciple.” Tough words. Jesus says, “Love your enemies,” but “hate your own family members?”

Jesus wants us to get our attention. When Jesus uses the word “hate,” he’s not talking about hatred as we may think of it, where to feel hatred, we have to feel it, tend it, keep it alive. If we don’t put energy into hatred, it may lessen into ambivalence. It may even get healed.

Jesus isn’t anti-family. But he is anti- anything we put in place of total commitment to God, anything that can become an idol for us. He’s talking about the reality that loving one’s blood family wrongly—giving it a higher priority than the God who alone can rightly order all our relationships—will get in the way of being Jesus’ disciples. Whoever isn’t willing to give up, well, everything, cannot be Jesus’ disciple.

The idea of cutting a branch off the family tree may come as welcome news, especially if your family tree is producing a lot of nuts. George Burns once said, “Happiness is having a large, loving, close-knit family... in another city.” But even with good relationships, Jesus wants them all to be subordinate to our relationship with God. What does God want for your children? Raise them with God’s desires in mind. What does God want for your spouse? Live in such a way that your marriage serves God. What does God want from you? Don’t use your family as a reason not to tend to your spiritual life.

What’s more, through baptism, through calling us together to be his brothers and sisters, children of God, Jesus makes a new family. Even when our earthly blood families fail us, we are part of a larger, eternal family. Even when we need to detach from people who raised us, even when, in order to be faithful to God, we need to unknot the ties that would bind us, we find ourselves tied to a larger family, parented by a God who will not fail us, will always love us, who cares for us, always and forever. When we have failed those we love, when we let down our own kith and kin, we find ourselves held within a fellowship of forgiveness, members of a family whose very purpose is reconciliation.

That is great news! But now we need to hear our second lesson for today, in which we see up close how hard it can be to live as a member of this Christ-centered family.

In his Letter to Philemon, a book in the New Testament we heard almost in its entirety this morning, Paul challenges Philemon to do something he probably does not want to do. That is, to take back his runaway slave, Onesimus, not as a slave, but as a brother; to receive him, not as property over which he has legal

rights, but as a human being, and a living member of the family of which Philemon, too, is a part—the family of Jesus Christ.

Here's the situation. Paul is in prison, again, for preaching the good news of Jesus Christ, probably in Ephesus on the coast of modern-day Turkey. About one hundred miles inland is the town of Colossae where one of the leaders of the church is a man named Philemon, who had himself become a member of Christ's family, the church, through Paul's preaching.

Philemon, like many householders of his day, had slaves. We may wish that Christians then would have all simply condemned and disavowed slavery, but don't let that keep us from hearing the radical call going on here, a call to Philemon to live as a member of Jesus' family.

One of Philemon's slaves is named Onesimus, which means Useful, but as it's turned out, Onesimus has been far from useful to Philemon. He's run away. He may also have stolen from Philemon as part of his getaway.

Onesimus has gone off to Ephesus, where now he too has heard the Gospel preached by Paul and has now become a Christian.

Both Philemon and Onesimus are part of the family of Christ. Both are brothers in this new family. One, Philemon, is a person with the law behind him. The other, Onesimus, has few rights and nowhere to lodge a legal appeal. Both are now members of the same family, a family big enough to embrace them both. But what does that look like, really?

Listen to how Paul works for reconciliation. Paul appeals to everything that binds Philemon to Paul. They are old friends. They are partners in the Gospel. Philemon owes his new life, his eternal life to Paul, whose preaching has set Philemon free from his old life to the new life of love in Christ.

But Paul also appeals to everything that binds Onesimus to Paul. Onesimus has become like a son, like his own heart to Paul. Paul would love to keep Onesimus with him, but he knows that if he does, it will cause a rift, a split in the family tree between Paul and Philemon.

Reconciliation is costly, and Paul bears the cost himself. He says to Philemon, "If you consider me your partner, welcome him back as you would welcome me. If he has wronged you in any way, charge it to me. I'll pay you back." But, more, Paul asks Philemon to forego what is his right by law: to punish Onesimus, even by death if he wants. Instead, do what he should as a brother in Christ, receive Onesimus back, not as a slave, but as the brother he has become.

Paul is so smart. This letter to Philemon was not a private letter sent for Philemon's eyes only. The letter is addressed to the church that meets at Philemon's house. This is a letter sent to be read aloud to all who gather in Christ's name in Philemon's home. And Paul ends the letter by telling Philemon to get a guest

room ready for him. When Paul gets out of prison, he wants to come see how this whole family thing is working out. Are they truly behaving as the family of Christ? He looks forward to coming and seeing for himself.

This whole family of Christ thing is beautiful but hard. It must have been hard for Onesimus to go back, clutching this letter from Paul to his brothers and sisters at Philemon's house, and to take the risk that Philemon would say no. It must have been hard for Philemon to let go of his legal rights and pay attention to God's higher law of love, to extend his hand, not to punish, but to reach out to a brother.

Jesus knew about extending his hands. One of our prayers says he stretched his arms wide on the hardwood of the cross, that everyone might come within the reach of his saving embrace. And yes, that means that we, brothers and sisters of Jesus, are to reach out with that same reconciling love that Christ shows us.

What did Philemon do? The Bible doesn't say. But we do have a letter from a bishop named Ignatius, written sometime before 108 AD, who wrote to the church at Ephesus: "In God's name, I have received your whole number in the person of Onesimus, whose love is indescribable, and who is your bishop."

In Christ, we have all received adoption as children of God. We are all made one family in Christ, with enough love and forgiveness for all of us to know, to share, to show.

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Dr. Amy Richter**, an Episcopal priest who, along with her husband, Joseph Pagano, serves at All Saints' Episcopal Church in Frederick, Md. Their most recent co-edited book is Saving Words: 20 Redemptive Words Worth Rescuing, published by Cascade.*