

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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May 17, 2009
Sixth Sunday of Easter
John 15:9-17

At Home in God's Love

Most of you are probably aware that over the last couple of years a task force was at work in this church on a process called a "Journey of Renewal." You might also be aware that the task force completed its work a couple of months ago and submitted a report to the session and congregation which summarizes what was accomplished and what they propose for future consideration. It's an ambitious proposal, and by the way, copies are still available on the back table. The session and board of deacons are very much in the process of talking about the proposals in the report, so I encourage everyone to join the conversation.

The report starts with a proposal of four themes for our ministry. Today our scripture prompts us to think more deeply about one of those themes, which happens to be the first of the four. Quick test—anyone know what it is? Clues: 2 words. Alliterative. The first letter is "L." You heard one of those words many times already in this service. Shout it out if you know it!

Learning Love.

I want to connect this theme to a strong emphasis which the Journey of Renewal calls for, and that is the theme of family and youth ministry.

Diana Garland teaches family ministry at Baylor University in Texas. She has written the definitive textbook on the subjects. She has also posted resources for teaching family ministry on the internet. She cares passionately about families and ministry with families.

She begins her classes by asking students to reflect on their own families and their experiences in congregations. You might imagine your answers to some of her questions:

- What kind of family did you live in when you were in grade school? If your family changed its structure, when and in what ways?
- If you grew up participating in a congregation, what do you remember learning in church about families? If you didn't grow up participating in a congregation, what shaped your ideas about family?
- If your family participated in congregational life, what memories do you have of the way the church helped or strengthened relationships in your family? If you didn't grow up participating in a congregation, who or what gave your family support and strength?
- What things did you learn at church or in other ways in your community that gave you skills for living faithfully and lovingly and skillfully in a family?

Provocative questions, aren't they? They start us thinking about our own stories, and open us up to thinking about the needs of families in our society. No human relationships are more important to us, more powerful in our lives, than the relationships we have with those we call our "family." And families in our day and time are stressed and strained.

You've heard the statistics. 50% of all marriages end in divorce. Nearly 40% of all children born in the U.S. today are born to unmarried parents. We don't look like the "Leave it to Beaver" families of mid-twentieth century television! Families are strained financially by wages which haven't kept pace with inflation, and in most two-parent homes, both parents work outside the home to make ends meet. At the same time, more and more consumer goods are seen as necessities, things we can't live without. And the social pressure to be busy, busy, busy is intense and takes a toll on family health. Families are hurting. Our primary relationships with the people we are given to love the most intimately, and most intensely, are in trouble.

Please notice that I am not attempting to pin blame on anyone. With Diana Garland, I believe that our despair is misdirected when we judge those who divorce as guilty of "not working hard enough at it." And those unmarried parents? They have a million different stories to tell. It is possible for single parents to do an awesome job of raising healthy, happy kids. And finally, as a mother who has always worked outside the home, I don't want to be judged, and neither do I judge mothers or fathers who live out their parental calling without a paid job. No, I do not believe that there is any single factor or social trend or moral failing which is making our families weak.

But I do wonder—often—how to minister more effectively in this context. And I wish that our families could better reflect the abiding, sustaining, covenant love of God. For I believe that just as Jesus commanded the community which first gathered around him to love one another, he also speaks to us across the centuries, telling us to be communities of love and partnership and channels of God's love for the world. Our families are the most basic communities in which we live as Christian people. The command to love one another as Christ has loved us is a command to families. Families can teach us how to fulfill that commandment, and test us in our ability to love. What God intends for us in Christian communities is what God intends for us in our families.

The topic is a natural one for a Christian wedding, and when I preside at a wedding, you are likely to hear a homily about love in the Christian community. Couples sometimes think that the ceremony is just about the two of them and their love for one another. But when they choose scriptures about love, that's my chance to point out that their love wasn't really their idea, that it didn't start within them and isn't supposed to stay within a circle of two. God made us all, married or single, all ages, all stages of life, for love, to grow in love and live in love. And all love comes from God, originates outside us, and has the potential to overflow into all our lives and relationships. The Bible's wisdom about love is given to Christian communities to help them to be more loving communities, so it is perfectly applicable to the Christian community of marriage. Love is lived in the Christian community of family. The Bible speaks of love not as a feeling, but as an action verb, something we are commanded to do. Love is hard work. But at the same time, love is a gift. It comes to us from God, and it multiplies in the community which gathers around Jesus in order to bless the whole world.

Listen to Eugene Peterson's translation of John 15:9-10 from *The Message*. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus says, "I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at

home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love."

To abide in Christ's love is to be at home in his love. That's what helps us to keep the commandment to love one another. And family ministry expert Diana Garland points out that "more than anywhere else, family life has the potential for teaching what it means to love, and to love in ways that discipline us in the ways of Christ." She writes, "Keeping up appearances on the outside is not enough. Christian living takes place in bedrooms and kitchens, in the hall waiting to get into the occupied bathroom, when a family member has all-night colic, or the stomach flu, or Alzheimer's disease. Living in families patiently, kindly and with self-control equips us for ministry to our neighbors by the roadside. The family is a 'school of virtue' in which God places us, day after day, with persons we are to learn to love." (1999, *Family Ministry*, Intervarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL, pp. 346-7)

Learn to love. Family love is not automatic. Marriages require learning love. After all, the wedding ceremony doesn't ask, "do you love each other now?" but "will you love one another?" Love must be practiced, and learned, and shared. It's no wonder that Jesus found it necessary to repeat his commandment and give it different contexts and tell parables and illustrate it and say it again and again: This is my COMMANDMENT. Love one another. It's not an option. It is his primary, root commandment.

Obedience to this commandment will strengthen our families, and our communities, and bless the whole world. And by experiencing Christ's sacrificial love, abiding in God's love, learning to live at home in God's love, our families will grow more obedient to the command. It's a circle, isn't it? Receive God's love in Christ, and you will be able to obey Christ's command to love. Obey Christ's command to love, and you will learn what it means to be at home in his love. His love is self-giving, and mutual, and it is the model which families, and communities, and the whole world need to learn.

We can start with learning love in this, our congregation, and sharing love with those who need it most. What about all those stressed families? How can I share love with them? Maybe by befriending the parents, getting to know the children by name, finding out their birthdays, making them part of your local family, and calling them when you don't see them because you miss them? That's not so hard, is it? They need support. Maybe by volunteering to help in the nursery, with Sunday school, or Vacation Bible School, or Rockhaven Camps? Those take a little more time and effort, it's true. But maybe this is your chance to practice, and learn, sacrificial love, Christ-like love.

Our goal as a Christian community is to obey Christ's command to love one another. God put us in the world to bear fruit. I believe our calling is to be a community where people can say,

In this family of faith, we are at home in God's love, and learning to love.