

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
May 10, 2009
Matthew 12:46-50

“Here are my mother and my brothers!”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Years ago, when our son Sasha was about 8, we marched with him—as we did every year—in the Gay Pride Parade in Northampton. He had been part of the parade from the time he was very little—first in a pouch on my chest, then in a stroller, then on his little bike, then on his roller skates. Anyway, we marched together when he was 10 and we waved our rainbow flag. When we returned home, I took the flag and tied it to our front porch so it could wave there proudly for a few days. (Some of you know this story already.)

Sasha watched me tie the flag with some too-bulky clothesline rope to the front porch. While I was doing this I asked him, “Sasha, do you know what the rainbow flag means?”

He rolled his eyes, distressed that his mother was so dumb and intrusive. “Yes,” he said with frustration, regretting he was asked such stupid questions.

We were quiet for a moment. Then I said to him, “Sasha, what do you think it means that I am tying this flag to the front of our house? What do you think it means about our family?”

Again, he looked exasperated that I was asking such dumb questions. He looked at me, sighed, and said, “It means we’re all lesbians.”

It seemed like a good answer to me, I decided to go with that.

Today I want to talk about the Scripture reading we have just heard from the Gospel of Matthew and I want to think with you about how in a healthy church family we are all mothers.

Welcome again to our Mother’s Day service.

Today we are all mothers. And there is good Biblical precedent for my saying that.

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him.⁴⁷ Someone told him, ‘Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.’⁴⁸ But to the one who had told him this, Jesus^{} replied, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’⁴⁹ And pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’*

Friends, we have our family of origin...our literal mother and maybe brothers and sisters. And as Christ-followers, as Jesus’ disciples, as members of a community of faith, we also have mothers and fathers, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles in our Church family.

The differences are many and clear...I know...

we are not related “by blood” to the members of our Church family (although some of us worship here with family members who are actually related to us)

but in a healthy Church family, we do play familial roles to and with each other. Unlike our family of origin, our Church family has a special focus, an inward pull or calling, a center of gravity that draws us in and connects us deeply one to another—that focus, that pull, that center is God.

God is at the center of our Church family, and in God’s name and in the service of God, we attend to one another, we care for one another, we relate to one another often as family members.

Another difference between our family of origin and our Church family is that our roles in our Church family are very fluid....we can “mother” someone one day and be “mothered” by them the next.

We can feel and act like an older sister or brother one day, and be a younger sister or brother to someone the next day. Our roles in our Church family are fluid and flexible—they change and adapt to different circumstances and needs.

When God is truly at the center of a Church family, we can try on or play different roles with one another and know that God is holding us all, present to us all, guiding us all, and we can do our best channeling and giving that energy and wisdom, or receiving and taking in good counsel and love.

Remember today's Scripture reading from the Book of Matthew...Jesus is speaking to a crowd of people and someone says: your mother is here and your brothers and they want to talk to you.

Jesus does not say, "They are not my family. Those gathered around me here are family." Jesus knows who his literal mother and brothers are, but he chooses to EXPAND the definition of family.

Essentially Jesus is saying,

Yes, I want to see them.

Yes, I will talk with them.

Yes, they are my family. But they are not my only family.

Can you not see what I am doing and preaching and living?

I am enlarging the notion of family to take us all in....all of us are gathered into the family of God.

Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' ⁴⁹And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

Whoever does the will of God is considered family...

You who had a rough childhood and feel alienated from your actual mother/father/siblings, welcome to this family, the family of God;

You who ran away from home and are estranged from your parents, welcome to this family, the family of God;

You who felt unseen, unheard or unappreciated by your family growing up, you have another shot at being seen/heard/appreciated, welcome to this family, the family of God;

You who lost your mother or father at too young an age and were filled with sorrow and grief, welcome to his family, the family of God;

You who carry regrets or wounds about things you or others said or did in your family of origin, welcome to this family, the family of God.

Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' ...pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

My friends, in a healthy Church family you have a chance to reconnect as family, to have a new and different family, another family...to feel and act in parental ways towards others, to take a younger one under your wing as an older sibling, to ask for support from a more experienced older brother or sister, to listen to, care for and support someone as a grandmother would, to look up to, visit and admire an elder as if they were your grandparent....

Friends, in a vibrant and healthy faith community, we have a chance to experience family again or in a new way in the family of God.

When Francesca tells me: I have some paperwork I have to complete that I am find overwhelming, can someone from the Church help me?
And Shirley and Linda separately meet Francesca at the Church to do the paperwork with her, they are acting like siblings—here, sweet sister, let me give you a hand.

When Hannah, Dale and Parker visit Phyllis at her home and refer to her as Grandma Phyllis and it makes their day and Phyllis' day to be together, they are acting like grandmother and grandchildren and great-grand-daughter together.

When Cindy and Judy call Gloria Ayvazian “Mom” and give her a big hug at church and pray for her during the week, they are acting like daughters—supporting Mama Gloria in meaningful and tender ways.

When Jim and Robert carry out their prison ministry visiting two incarcerated young men (one in Northampton, one in Ludlow), they are acting like fathers worrying about, caring for, and counseling young men in need.

When Annie Turner gathers with Church members to guide them through the process of writing their spiritual memoirs and she lays out books that are good examples and talks through the gentle and lovely writing process, she is acting like an older sister ready to prod and guide, listen and support.

When Sally, who has no biological children of her own, teaches Children Church for a six-week rotation helping the older group to find their voice and deepen their spirituality, she is acting like a beloved aunt eager to mentor and direct, listen and be close.

We play all these roles in our Church family, and there is precedent in the Bible—there is an example in Jesus' own life and teaching.

Welcome to this family, the family of God.

Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? ...pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!' ⁵⁰For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.

The key ingredient for a healthy Church family—no matter what we experienced in our family of origin, no matter what joys, wounds, strengths and sorrows we bring with us from our family of origin—the key ingredient for a HEALTHY Church family is to place God at the center of the family and to keep God at the center of the family.

If God is not at the center, we have the terrible possibility of recreating in our church family the wounds that may have occurred in our family of origin.

BUT if our Church family holds God at the center and each Church family member tries with love and discipline to be a faithful disciple of Jesus, we can create HEALTHY Church families and take on different familial roles with ease, confidence and joy.

We have all heard stories of churches where God seemed to slip away from being at the center of the Church family. This week in my Clergy Bible Study when we were talking about this issue, someone called those churches “Clergy Killers.” When God is NOT at the center of the Church family, church dynamics can become hurtful and destructive—for the Pastor AND for all Church members.

And so we work, consciously and diligently, to keep God at the center of our Church family.

We try not to collect Church members but to develop disciples.

We worry less about membership and more about discipleship.

We pray deeply for and with each other.

We start meetings and book groups and writing groups, Ladies Aid meetings and even work projects with prayer.

We share in Bible Study, Living the Questions series, Loose Ends, and Thursday Morning Prayers together.

We keep God at the center.

For when we keep God at the center, we are able to slip with ease in and out of the roles of being loving and attentive mothers and fathers; funny, smart and playful sisters and brothers; caring and supportive grandparents; crazy, wise, and goofy aunts and uncles.

Today we are all mothers.

Tomorrow we may all be siblings.

Tuesday we may be grandchildren and aunts, fathers and uncles, grandmothers and brothers.

This morning, I look out at you, my beautiful and precious Church family, and say to you the words Jesus said to his beloved companions:

Here are my mother, my sisters and my brothers.

Amen.