

2007-1-21 Family as Metaphor MLB

Opening Words

We are here
as a warm winter gives way to colder days,
to worship, which means to turn from the frantic
toward the sublime, to leave the surface
for the depths, to face our lives
in the mirror of love, tender and tough.
And so we approach our time together by saying:

As we move through this year of transition and joy, we remember with gratitude the power of our living heritage, which moves through time like a clear running creek; refreshing us with the sweet draughts of courage, hope, justice-making, peaceful living, ever deeper honesty, and more truthful loving. And so we kindle this light in thanksgiving.

Sequence

When I contemplate the cosmos, stretching in all directions beyond my calculation, mostly empty, but dotted with small stars who cannot know I am here, I think, how rare is love! How unlikely! How surprising!

When I contemplate the earth quietly spinning through this vast abyss; or when I note the unspeaking mountains, the secretive seas, the inarticulate clouds, the unthinking rocks, I think, how rare is love! How unlikely! How surprising!

When I contemplate the city which surrounds me, with streets lined with trees which I can name but which cannot name me, with bricks and concrete which delight my eyes but never address my heart, I think, how rare is love! How unlikely! How surprising!

When I contemplate the building which houses me right now, the hushed warm wood above me, the still soft carpet below me, the clear mute glass of the windows, I think, how rare is love! How unlikely! How surprising!

Oh Love! When I contemplate how little I really know, how unsure I am, I think, maybe the cosmos, the planet, the city and this house are setting a good example without knowing it ...because to exist at all seems surprising and unlikely! And in this noisy world where so many assure me that they know both the name of God and the trajectory of fate, how can I help but want but to join in on such a rare and precious silence...

Silence

Oh Love! You have no face nor body nor house,
yet you echo in the faces that inhabit my heart, those who live there forever no matter if
they are near or far, past or present, haunting or blessing.
Let their names rise into my heart, or into my mouth, that I may share this moment of
silence with them...

Naming

When I contemplate the wonder of the silent stars, the quiet oak trees, the perfectly still
stones, and then come to realize that their wonder is actually transcended by the
astonishment called love, and the transforming magic called music, I open my heart in the
gratefulness that confirms my every breath.

Reading

*The First Reading is a journalist's reflection on new forms of family, and the original
essay written just last year by Kristy Karras can be found in a website called
"www.Unmarried America.org"*

When an uninsured member of Adriane Colvin's urban tribe had a brain aneurysm, the
tribe - a group of friends that served as her substitute family - was there to help. They
arranged her doctor visits, helped her around the house and started a fund to pay her
medical bills.

"It was just an amazing outpouring of support," Colvin said. But she wasn't surprised:
The tribe has been supporting its members' needs for years.

Such groups of adult friends usually don't call themselves tribes, or even necessarily
think of themselves that way. All they know is, when they need someone to help them
move the furniture, give dating advice or plan a home-cooked meal, they often turn to
chosen families rather than biological ones.

"They evolve so organically that you don't recognize the social momentum they contain.
Once it gets to that point, you can remove a person from the group, and it doesn't change
the group. It's highly clustered. You can actually graph it and see how this works in vast
numbers of lines between people."

How do you know you're in a tribe? Go down the list of things your family used to do
and ask, 'Does my family do this for me, or do my friends?' For example, who vets
potential dates? Whose shoulder do you cry on if you've had a bad day?

People have never done this before. They haven't spent this much time away from family
before. It's unheard of, and it creates a lot of anxiety. Just by giving it a name and kind of
sparkling this discussion - a lot of people came forward and said, 'Me, too.' They have
bought property together, started businesses and are helping each other raise kids - an
especially helpful aspect of tribal life when blood relatives aren't near and for people who,

as single adults with single friends, didn't have much experience with marriage or children.

The Second Reading comes from the Gospel of Mark, written by an anonymous author just after the Romans sacked Jerusalem in the year 70. The book is an interpretation of the ancient life of the Galilean teacher in the context of the times, rather than a sober reporting of it. Note that this author characteristically writes in the present tense.

His mother and his brothers come on the scene. They stand outside the place where he is, sending a message into him. People are gathered round him, sitting on the floor, as the message is presented: “Your mother and brothers are outside and want to see you.”

He answers “Who? My mother and brothers?” And then looking right at those seated around him, he says, “Here is my mother and my sister and my brother.”

Sermon

Life doesn't really care very much if you are on sabbatical, I discovered while on one. Heart-breaking things do not go on hiatus just because you are.

My mother called me in September to tell me the sad news that Elaine died. My aunt Elaine. My mother's best friend since childhood. Elaine's daughter Chris asked if I might offer a eulogy for her mother at the Memorial Mass. Of course I was honored and moved to do so.

Elaine came from a large family, with many, many relatives in all directions. My mother, on the other hand, like my father, are both single children. So, according to literal bloodlines, Elaine was not my aunt, since I have none.

But as I said in her eulogy, with all of her blood nephews and nieces present, Elaine was my favorite aunt. There were other aunts too. Aunt Imelda. Aunt Emma.

This is a somewhat common practice in the States, I have discovered, to use bloodline family words as metaphors for very special relationships among friends. Perhaps some of you do this in your own circles.

My friend Paul's wife Janice died suddenly while I was on sabbatical, too. I had married them 12 years ago, and, movingly, they named their son Mark after me. I adored Janice.

When I went out to California to spend time with Paul and grieve for Janice, Paul always referred to me as Uncle Mark in the presence of his son Mark. Paul has several blood brothers who are Mark's uncles. But I too am an uncle to Mark.

My family was small, but metaphor made it large. Even my beloved grandfather Umberto was not my blood grandfather...my mother's birth father Eduardo Pozzi died at the Mayo Clinic of meningitis when she was but a little girl, and Umberto later married my grandmother Anna, and officially adopted my mother. But I assure you, Umberto was no less my "real" grandfather than my grandfather Nazzareno was.

Almost anyone who has had the privilege of adopting children will understand, probably viscerally, what I mean when I say that my grandfather Umberto was a "real" grandfather.

The word "family" *itself* is used as a metaphor: "This church is my family," is one common affirmation I hear around here. "Or the choir is my family." Some of you could probably add a dozen or more ways that you use the word "family" in your own life...metaphorically.

Now "friend" is a perfectly good word. One of my favorites. It's what I would call a significant word. After all, "friendship" is one of the richest gifts life offers us. Yet there are times that family metaphors seems to supercede that powerful relationship, and reshape it. For example, the Rev. Barbara Pescan, who preached here while I was gone on sabbatical, calls me her brother. And I call her my sister.

I have a blood sister, Lynne, whom I love. But Barbara is also my real sister, whom I love. And when my best friend, Richard Sinkoff, flew to the General Assembly in Salt Lake City back in 1998, to come and hear the sermon I delivered there, (he did this, bless him, as my birthday present that year,) I introduced him to the 17 members of the church who attended that General Assembly in this way "This is my brother, Richard." Now I have a perfectly good brother in blood, Robert, up in Michigan, whom I love. But Richard is my real brother too. The metaphor is important to us both. Like calling Elaine "aunt" was important to me. Because it describes something real.

Rev. James Dobson claims to know a great deal about "the family" here in the United States of America. And not just here. His radio broadcasts called Focus on the Family are heard even in the People's Republic of China, in translation. He is the most powerful conservative evangelical leader in the United States right now. His devotees are, in number, far greater than both Jerry Falwell's and Pat Robertson's at their peak of influence.

Rev. Dobson is very clear...the patriarchal family where the father rules the roost is the *only* kind of family. Spanking children until they cry is perfectly appropriate, he affirms. And if they cry over five minutes, he says, it's no longer the well deserved pain making them cry, but protest, so you need to give the child another whack. Homosexual people have no right to families, except the families they were born into, families, he asserts, which should not support their children in their perverted ways in any way.

The words “diversity” and “tolerance” sound noble, he says, but they are not. They are code words, he says, for saying that there is more than one opinion which can have authentic religious or philosophical underpinnings. Such as that there is more than one way of looking at the concept of abortion and the right of women to make fully accountable, and well-thought out controversial moral decisions on their own. Or such as that people who love same sex partners are fully human and not the hateful, stubborn lust-crazed monsters he makes them out to be.

James Dobson is educated. Passionate. And he cares about the word “family.” But, he understands the word family to have an intrinsic and absolute structure. There can be no metaphorical families, nor can any metaphor be real. There is no such thing as a diverse family. Oh, he understands legal adoption, don’t get me wrong. And he understands that many modern families, such as the one portrayed in our story this morning, do not share skin color or ethnicity. And he understands, begrudgingly, that single parent families have to exist, because both death and divorce are undeniable realities.

But, he and his fellow religious leaders have taken complete control of all modern discourse about this in the United State of America. The phrase “family values” which he champions means primarily this for him: that families have limited, absolute structural forms. This phrase is never associated with folks like us in this congregation. This is a church chock full of families, all kinds of families...look around you...but because we use the words *diversity* and *tolerance* around here, he insists, we really don’t understand family values at all.

Yet ultimately, although his power is great, and although Dobson’s preaching to 200,000,000 on the radio is numerically more impressive by far than the mere 200,000 Unitarian Universalists that exist in this world, I have to believe that Dobson’s ideology is ultimately doomed to failure.

Why? Precisely because of what Kristy Karras writes about. There are already lots of diverse and metaphorical families out there for real. Those urban tribes, as she calls them. Those people who live far away from the blood families that they love...or even from families they find hard to love. Our society has become mobile beyond the expectations of people at the turn of the 20th century, who often lived all their lives in small towns, often in houses their grandparents built. Now, the great cities on the coasts...west coast, east coast and the north coast cities like Chicago are filled with people who live far away from their parental home. Even Columbus, nowhere near any coast, is packed with these urban tribes.

And all of these tribes, little by little, she insists, discover they’re acting and behaving entirely like blood families. Because Dobson is right about one thing...families are very, very important. It’s hard to live without one. They are the central building blocks of society.

Oh, Jane Howard may be right, in her thought placed at the top of your order of celebration. Perhaps people don't have to use the metaphor "family," if they don't want to. Perhaps tribe will do for some, or clan, or even the rather computery word, network. I think as these new family systems develop, the vocabulary will remain fluid for a while, which is fine, as far as I am concerned. We don't need any new Dobsons deciding once and for all, and for all people, what certain words mean, and who owns them.

But I think it pretty clear what all these metaphors are about, what reality they stand for. They stand for raising money for a woman who has no health insurance, as Kristy Karras suggests. Or they stand for the people who help you move. Or for people who are there to "vet" your dates...that is, the people who scrutinize your dates to help you determine their suitability. Or they stand for people who cook you home-made soup when you have the flu, and the people with whom you talk about the real stories of your heart...without strategies or fears.

Having these new families doesn't mean giving up blood families, although, sometimes, it has to be said, some of these new families thrive precisely because the blood families have taken such a sour course over the years, with various betrayals and dramas. But mostly, these families live side by side, and both are important.

For example, this December I visited Richard Reisman, the brother of John Reisman of this church. By amazing co-incidence, Richard is the oldest California friend of my own best friend and brother, Richard Sinkoff. The small world quality of this amazing connection is the kind of thing that gets me spinning with delight. So I went to visit Richard on his ranch an hour and half or so north of San Francisco in wine country. Richard lives on a huge ranch, which he bought with and shares with a number of other people, many of whom, like him, have lived there for 30 years since they all joined together to buy the place, about a thousand acres of paradise. It's a beautiful landscape in which to live, with rolling hills, lovely lakes, French intensive gardens, wide pastures and working vineyards. There are many splendid houses, some already on the property when it was bought, some designed beautiful and new, all within short walks from each other along rustic paths.

Richard Reisman said to me: "It's like a wonderful family here, with weekend dinners, and deep conversations and walks and shopping trips." And I really had a sense of that family-like feeling while I was there. But one of the things Richard told me over and over again while I was there was how much he loved John his brother in Columbus, and how important John and Jane are to him. He said this with moving emotion visible on his face. So clearly, having a local family does not at all mean tearing away from your blood family. Not at all. Both of Richard's families will show up when he needs them, and vice versa.

Although the story in the gospel of Mark suggest otherwise, doesn't it? It seems at first like a rude gesture on Jesus' part, to turn away his mother and brothers by telling them that his real family consists of the people he is now hanging around with. But in so doing, the critic Elizabeth Schussler-Fiorenza, suggests, Jesus is making a pointed attack not on his own family, but on the whole idea of what might be called a Dobson family, where the father and father alone had any dignity, and the children and wife were simply adjuncts to the father, with no rights or dignity of their own. When Jesus says of his friends: "These are my brother and sister and mother" he seems deliberately to have neglected to mention "father." Not because, please, that fathers are terrible...they are not. But a family structure that is predicated, as most first century families were from Rome to Damascus to Jerusalem, on the total freedom of the father or patriarch set against the powerlessness of the wife and children, nieces and nephews, younger aunts and uncles, economically, and in every other way, could only prove disastrous to the human spirit. You might call the Jesus of this story "the anti-Dobson."

But the most important factor of this story to me is that it reveals that new forms of family have been living side by side with blood families for a long, long time. It's not just something new that popped up in coastal cities of the United States because of great youth migrations. It's been going on for along time. And in other countries besides this one. For example, there are, in India, Bangladesh and Pakistan, over a million people called *hijra*. They are male to female transsexuals and in some cases, transvestites. Some undergo operations, some do not. But they are a whole culture to themselves, more than half of them Muslim in religious affiliation, although there are a many Hindus as well. When a young man decides he is to be a *hijra*, most often his blood family kicks him out onto the streets. And no matter what schooling you may have had, there will be no more work for you...no pharmacies, factories, schools, offices.

The only thing you can do in the culture is to beg...or sell your sexual favors on the street. And over a million do just that. But, everyone, even those degraded by society, needs a family. So over the last hundreds of years, the *hijra* family itself has become something of an institution, living along side families of more traditional patriarchal structure. And the culture thrives, despite the horrendous obstacles.

Leonardo Da Vinci treated his pupil Francesco Melzi as a son. Sometimes their relationship is portrayed as erotic, but there is no evidence that Leonardo engaged erotically with him, only with Salai, his lover of many decades. And he left Melzi all his drawings, his paintings, his famous note-books, most everything a father might leave a son, except some lucrative vineyards which he left to Salai, to take care of him.

As I wrote in the newsletter, I have a son too, even though we are not related by blood. Tony's mother died when he was six, his biological father was never part of his life, having spent the most of his years in prison. And he grew up a ward of the state, raised in a

variety of foster homes in different towns. I've known him since he was 19. We love each other very much, and communicate daily. I am his babbo, his dad, and he is my figlio caro, my beloved son. We agree about this, we covenant that this is true. It's deliberate. It sustains us both, this new family relationship. Tony is 23 now and lives in Albuquerque, with his partner Colin, my sweet son-in-law. The laws of our nation don't think he's my son-in-law, nor Tony my son, and neither does James Dobson. But Dobson has nothing worthwhile to say about my family life, except to agree with me that family life is central, important, and precious. And laws... well, in time, they almost always change.

Western and Eastern histories are filled with stories of families that do not follow traditional norms. Many traditional families are wonderful.

Some are not of course. Many chosen families are wonderful. Some are just as poorly functioning as some of the sad families rooted in Dobson's religious worldview, where parents are encouraged to smack their kids till they cry, and then smack them when they don't stop crying.

The point is, we religious and philosophical progressives, call us what you will, are even more supportive of the centrality of the family than Dobson ever could be. Blood families, chosen families, accidental families, deliberately covenanted families. Those uncles and aunts, those brothers and sisters, those sons and daughters... blood or no blood, metaphorical or biological...they're real. As far as I am concerned, religious liberals cannot go wrong in proclaiming without any hesitation whatsoever that you cannot possibly have too many healthy real families, the ground and source of our cultures, the support of our individual selves.

For W.H. Auden is right you know..."we must love one another or die." Love fiercely, honestly, deeply emotionally, unconditionally, joyfully, painfully and with gratitude. Blessed be Love, our true end, and our true means, our joy and our struggle, our sustenance and our strength. Amen.

Offering

We always offer this time as an opportunity during our meeting for worship to bring our pledges and gifts for the support of the institutional health and welfare of this congregation, its site, buildings, staff, heat, and future. Thank you for making this place possible.

A New Heart Sutra

The heart that beats in my breast
rhymes to the beat of the heart in your breast.

The beat is a poem written by no one with a name, a verse written for both for those who suffer and let that suffering define them, and for those who have learned not to let suffering define them once and for all time.

The muscle heart that beats in my breast is real,
made of flesh and blood.

The metaphoric heart that beats in my breast
is also real, made of yes and love.

Family and friends and strangers, all with hearts
beating, rhyming with each other,
making a world where we are never, not now,
not ever, alone, or entirely our own.

Empty and full at the same time, I bow, o Love.