

**Proper 13, Year B: The Body of Christ; the Family of God**

Ephesians 4:1-16 – St. John's, Salisbury – 8/2/09

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As a society we have for some years been involved in a sometimes-heated discussion about what constitutes a family and what exactly our family values ought to be. A great deal of discussion was generated a dozen or so years ago by the publication of Hillary Clinton's book *It Takes a Village*. You remember its thesis, I'm sure, based on an African proverb, that everyone in a village has to cooperate in order for a child to be properly raised. In the past few years we've been hearing a whole lot more about what constitutes proper family values primarily from folks like Jerry Falwell, James Dobson, and Pat Robertson, whose positions on a whole raft of issues seem to stem from a view of our societal mores that has long-since ceased to be particularly mainstream, at least in what have come to be called blue states.

When I was still a lawyer in California I often thought about what constitutes family since I was representing youngsters who were being removed from their parents because of either abuse or neglect. Some were lucky enough to have parents who did what was necessary to overcome the demons that led to their children's removal – usually the abuse in one way or another of drugs or alcohol. But many ended up having to live in another family. Some, likely to be White, had lived in nuclear families, with little contact with other close relatives. This was surely the product of a phenomenon related to the development of the automobile, which permitted, perhaps even encouraged, people to leave their hometowns in search of adventure and success. Though I was myself far from an abused child, I certainly understand the phenomenon of the nuclear family, since I was actually the only child of a couple who themselves had moved from their original roots and eventually moved, as did I separately, all the way across the country. The children from this sort of home who were taken from birth parents most often had to go to foster homes. A different phenomenon that I noticed, though, was that other children – primarily African-American – were likely to have large extended families, and, therefore, that if they were unable to live with their own parents, they went instead to live instead with relatives, often surrounded by aunts, uncles and cousins.

Whether the families that the children in our court went to were their grandparents or another relative with whom they had a good relationship was often the deciding factor in whether they were going to be able to

keep their parents in their lives or not through their childhood. For those who had been able to bond with birth parents, it was, no matter what the problems that led to their removal, in almost every case, a terribly damaging experience for them to lose those parents. And often the first thing those kids who had lost frequent contact with their parents did, when they became legally adults, was to start trying to find them. I recall one girl in particular, who had been terribly abused by her birth parents while she was very young. She was placed into a foster home in which the adults eventually became her legal guardians. She also had a child advocate in her life, helping her to mature into her teen years. One day she came to me to ask me to prepare a petition asking the court to change her last name from that of her birth parents to a combination of the names of her guardian and her advocate, which I was happy to do, since I perceived that this must be a sign that she had been able to transfer her affection to those parental figures who had actually cared for her. It was, however, only a few months until she turned 18, and I heard shortly after she did that she had left her guardians' home to travel to Alaska to rejoin the parents with whom she hadn't lived in more than a decade. So, regardless whether a birth family may have been dysfunctional, or even abusive, it now seems to me that there is an almost instinctual need for children to reunite with the parents with whom, as babies, they had once bonded.

With that experience in mind, when I read this morning's passage from the Letter to the Ephesians with those soaring words calling us to recognize ourselves as members of one family, united in love even in our diversity, I thought once again about the nature of family as we are called to it by our religion. Hear it again:

...one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

This vision appears not to be based on a model of either the nuclear family in which I lived, or the kinds of substitute families into which were placed the kids I represented, but one much closer in type to the notion of that village of which Secretary Clinton wrote. We ought all, this letter tells us, to think of ourselves as parts of the body of Christ, each one a part that, "working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love."

Those families of the children I represented were perfect illustrations of what results when both love and unity are lacking, for, despite the fact that almost all of the parents from whom the children were being removed spoke, sometimes passionately, of their love for their children, their actual behavior toward the children demonstrated that the love was far more abstract than practical, since in their dysfunction the parents were clearly far more focused on their own needs than those of their children. In essence, to use a musical analogy, they were playing a solo rather than working with the rest of the orchestra.

Actually, the musical analogy reminds me of an experience that Ann and I had a couple of weeks ago, when we went up to Tanglewood to see the Boston Symphony Orchestra in a Saturday morning rehearsal of the Sunday afternoon all-Mozart program. Although the first half of the morning was quite musical and enjoyable, the second half was very frustrating – for us, and we suspect, also for the musicians and conductor. For over half an hour one passage, just a few bars, was played over and over – and over again! We couldn't hear the conversation between conductor Levine and the musicians from where we sat, though it appeared rather animated, but it was easy to imagine that it went something like the one in this story about Sir Thomas Beecham and the musicians of the London Philharmonic of which he was the long-time conductor. Those musicians also were playing, and re-playing and re-re-playing a very short section of a symphony, obviously not yet to the satisfaction of the conductor. Finally one of the musicians, with just a little show of annoyance, piped up with a question: "Er, Sir Thomas, just how would you like us to play this?" With but a single beat, Beecham's response was: "Together!"

So, may we strive always to play our individual parts together with each other in true community as we work to become worthy members of the body of the one who, through love, gave himself for us.

AMEN