What Kind of Family?

June 27-28, 2015

 You all look wonderful today, cooling off after this hot spell. It is comfortable in here and we thank God for this lovely place in which to worship. I am so glad to be here with you. I hope that by the end of worship, you are glad I am here, too. Let’s begin with a prayer...

*[Jesus said,]15 “If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.*

*John 14:15-17*

And we heard a few minutes ago this passage from Romans 8:19…

*(NRSV) 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God...*

*Romans 8:19*

And this paraphrase of Romans 8:19…

*“All creation stands on tiptoe to see what will become of the sons and daughters of God”*

 Isn’t that beautiful? Can you see the world poised, holding its breath, waiting to see what we will become?

 Pastor Suzanne has led us these past weeks in an exploration of the Holy Spirit, one of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. We don’t usually see much about the Holy Spirit, but oddly enough, this is the very part of God that comes to live inside us when we believe in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is available to us at all times and in all circumstances… if we just listen carefully enough. We have looked at the Holy Spirit as Counselor and how the Spirit advises us. We’ve looked at what it means to live according to the Spirit’s leading. We’ve looked at the Holy Spirit regarding the kind of legacy we leave when we follow the Spirit. Today, we are going to look at what kind of family we are when we follow the Holy Spirit.

 I claim to be part of the family of Jesus Christ, confirmed by my baptism and by the Holy Spirit, who dwells in me. Sometimes I can hear the Spirit of Truth, the Advocate, the Holy Spirit whispering in my ear, speaking with sighs too deep for words.

 Here is what the Spirit tells me. Now it's not always about just exactly this, but whatever the situation or question I’m posing, the overall instruction never changes. Here it is…

 Love God and love others as much as I love myself. That sounds easy, but I really like myself! It’s a big ask! It requires that I allow something other than my own selfish needs to direct my time, what I do and to whom I do it. I have to give up my control, let the Spirit direct me.

 But when I am part of the family, the followers of Jesus, then that is what I’m called to do. So, I have to look at my life and see if that is true. Do I demonstrate my love of those around me? Do I show it in some clear and special way? If I was being tried in court as a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict me?

 Love is what the family does. Jesus says so, very clearly.

*(NRSV) 34 "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. 35 By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

*John 13:34-35*

 It is what Jesus expects of his family. We are to think in terms of love, of caring for each other, and of worshiping God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.

 This is the kind of family Jesus invites us to be… no, I said that wrong. This is the kind of family that Jesus COMMANDS US TO BE!

 Over the past six months, Pastor Suzanne and her staff, along with David Finney, have been trying to figure out some way to approach the issue of race relations. We have struggled with that. In Springboro, Ohio, a largely white community, how do we talk about race? Problems, it seems, happen in Dayton or Cincinnati, Ferguson or Baltimore, but not here. We are not upset. We are business as usual. We feel safe in our community, untouched by the drugs and violence we see on the news every hour. It’s only when we are in stress that we talk about painful, frightening things. But you and I are part of the family of Jesus Christ… God-breathed, Christ-centered, Spirit-driven.

 What I’m about to say has not been discussed with the staff, or with Pastor Suzanne, or with David Finney. This is one of those times when the Holy Spirit spoke to my heart, in sighs too deep for words. So, if you don’t like what you hear, I’m the one to blame. I have been turning over this sermon for months. On Thursday, it was still unwritten. Nothing was coming together, which is unusual for me. So much was happening in our Annual Conference, our country, and my life, that it simply would not come into focus. That stopped on Friday. I read a commentary from Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes, Lead Pastor at Saint Matthew’s United Methodist Church in Action, Massachusetts. It is entitled “Pastor’s Reflection: What To Do About Charleston.” What he said there got my attention and held it. He has given me permission to quote some of what he wrote. Pastor Steve Garnass-Holmes…

 “The shootings at Emmanuel AME Zion Church in Charleston, SC dominated our thoughts for a while, but we’re tempted to move on to other things now. Our outrage may be sincere enough, but it was days ago and far away and, as white people in an almost totally white church, what can we do about it, right? We’re not racists, right? What can we do but but shake our heads and then… well, go on to other things? Right? I mean, when we try to think of what to do all we can do is…nothing . Just sit there. Well, actually there are some things we really need to do. And the first is: Nothing. Just sit there.

 “1. Seriously. Do nothing. Stop. Stop trying to put it out of your mind. Stop trying to go on to other things. Stop and sit with it. Stay there. Sit with it without protecting yourself from it. Get in touch with your feeling of powerlessness, maybe even despair. Don’t do anything about that. Just let it be. This is not just a problem, it’s a loss. Until we grieve, we can’t move forward. Sit with it until the deep sadness of it seeps into you. Sit with the sadness that such hate could fill a human heart. Sit with the names of the people killed: Rev. Clementa Pinckney. Rev. Sharonda Coleman-Singleton. Myra Thompson. Tywanza Sanders. Ethel Lee Lance. Cynthia Hurd. Rev. Daniel L. Simmons. Rev. Depayne Middleton-Doctor. Susie Jackson. Sit with them until you know that racism is not about ideologies or history or politics: it’s about people and how they get hurt.

 “Sit with it until the outrage of someone killing a church full of people because they’re black gets hold of your spine, twists your guts. Sit with it until it occurs to you that if you want to you can ignore it, walk away and think of something else—but black people can’t walk away from it. They can’t even go to their own Bible study and get away from it. They know they may be shot, or arrested, or frisked just because they’re black. Sit with it until it really sinks in that racism puts people in danger and destroys the whole society—your society, not just someone else’s. Sit with it until you can at least glimpse why people are tired of this. Why every time there’s another killing of an unarmed black man there’s an outcry. Why people are outraged, why people are so demanding, crying out for change. Stay with it until you feel even a tinge of shared vulnerability. Stay with it until your heart’s broken, until it doesn’t feel like somebody else’s problem, but yours. Now you’re on to something.

 “2. When you can’t do ‘nothing’ any more, then sit some more and pray. Before you opinionate, first pray. Pray to behold what is in God’s heart, or at least a sliver of it. Pray for the lives taken. Pray for the lives shattered. Pray for every black person who wonders—who has to wonder—if they’re next. Pray for the perpetrators, for their families, and for the society that raised them. Pray for all those whose lives are broken by prejudice, exclusion and fear: people of every color and every kind, queers and Natives and Muslims and women and children. Pray for this nation. Pray for God’s mercy and guidance. Pray to internalize more deeply God’s vision of a world that really is for everybody. And God means everybody. Pray not just that people will listen to you, but that you will listen to God. Pray for change. Then go on—go on, don’t stop there: pray to be changed. That’s a beginning.

 “3. Now you’re ready for some serious prayer: confess and repent. Confess that you don’t know what to do. Confess your feeling of powerlessness. And confess your part in it all. I know, you’re not responsible for racism, or the hurtful history of this country. Most of it happened before you even came along. But you’re part of it. Confess that. Don’t see clearly your part? Confess that. Don’t get it? Confess that. Like confessing at the foot of the cross: of course you didn’t crucify Jesus but yes, you do. Coming at this with an attitude of humility and confession rather than defensiveness will make all the difference. Pray that God will open your heart and mind. It you really want the world to change it has to begin with you, so get started and pray for that. Pray to be changed.

 “4. Now, don’t stop praying, but at this point you’re ready to go on to something more: get educated. The history of racism in the US is not just about slavery and the KKK and a few crazy misfits. It’s about our whole culture. Seriously: our whole culture down to its foundations is saturated with the principles of white supremacy and privilege. It has been from our beginning and still is, even after the Civil Rights Movement. (I mean, how else would we have thought it was OK to even have a country by stealing the land from the Indians?) Don’t believe me? Well, get educated. It’s there—in our religion, our politics and our commerce. All through our history, from the Constitution itself through the commercial underpinnings of humans as property, the Civil war (yes it was about slavery), Jim Crow laws, the Doctrine of Discovery, Supreme Court decisions defining “white,” Indian reservations, the GI Bill, the Trail of Tears, Indian Boarding Schools, red-lining and engineered economic disparity, to today’s racial imbalance in police brutality and the for-profit prison industry—the system has been built on white privilege. And the way the system works is through ignorant acceptance. Like someone siphoning money from your bank account, it works as long as you don’t know it’s working. To ignore it is to sustain it. So check it out.

 “White privilege doesn’t mean we’re a “bad” nation, or bad people. What is bad, though, is when we refuse to acknowledge there’s a system in place that hurts people, and we go along with it. White privilege is that kind of system. It’s like this: suppose you take your kids to the parade. Spectators, good people, follow a sort of first come, first served rule, and line up along the street as they arrive. But your kids are too short to see over the people in front of them. Now there’s nothing evil about the folks in front, or evil about being tall, or evil about first come, first served. No one means to enforce ”tall privilege.” But there it is. There’s an arrangement in place that favors some people and excludes others. Of course you’re not so stupid or mean to just stand there and make your kids stare at the backs of the people in front of them and miss the whole parade, are you? No: you say something, and people let the kids get up front. You notice a system of privilege, and you change it.

 “What’s evil is when there’s a system that favors some people and excludes others and we don’t do anything about it. With all the talk these days about a “new normal,” we keep the “old normal.” That’s what’s evil. And the first step in doing the right thing is coming to see the system, to notice the old normal. So we get educated about racism and white privilege. This will require some study, maybe, and an anti-racism workshop or two, things like that. The more you learn, the more clearly you can see the system at work in your life, in the news (and—good grief—in the reporting of the news) and in the word around you. But don’t stop there.

 “5. Here’s another really important thing you can do. Develop relationships with people of color. Cross your own color barriers. Don’t just read about what it “must be like.” Find out from people who live it. That’s partly because you want first hand information. But it’s mostly because this is all about relationships. If there’s anything Jesus was infuriatingly good at, it was developing relationships that undermined existing systems of privilege and exclusion. Follow Jesus, and do that. Laws and public policies will have to change, but the way they will change is when we first create a new kind of community. That’s what God is doing among us: calling us into a covenant in which we acknowledge our own privilege, use compassionately our power, and welcome to the table those who are excluded and receive their gifts. (It’s not about handouts; it’s about mutual giftedness.) That’s the whole Empire of God Jesus was doing. That’s what the communion table is all about.

 “6. I think another thing we’re called to do is to talk about it. We need to pluck up the courage to talk about racism at least as much as we talk about the Reds and the weather— especially to white people. Make that the new normal. To actually talk about what’s going on in the world. It will mostly be listening, but you can listen with some really good questions. But don’t let the subject pass. I know, we don’t want to rock the boat. But listen: do you want change or don’t you? Rock the ding dang boat! Remember how the first disciples changed the world by spreading the news about Jesus.

 “And when it gets hard, when people are against you, when you get discouraged… well, now you’re in the boat with Jesus. Now you’re in it with your sisters and brothers. Now you’re right in that place where the prophets stood, where Jesus walked, where miracles happen. After all what is a miracle but when something bucks the system?

 “Spoiler alert: this will be hard work. You will fail a lot. So we need each other, and we need God. But that’s not so hard, is it?—to need each other, and to need God? It’s what we’re about in this life. And it’s what God needs of us. We won’t necessarily change the world…. But listen: when one note changes, it’s a whole new chord. Notice the seismic shift in your heart when you heard the families of Emmanuel Church forgive Mr. Roof, the murderer. There’s something there, isn’t there? Some kind of power? You bet there is. There is something you can do even about something as deep and wide as racism. You can tap into a love that’s even deeper, even wider, and a community that shares that love. It will make a difference, I promise. What kind of family are we today? What kind of family do we want to become? What kind of family is the Holy Spirit calling us to be? ‘All creation stands on tiptoe to see what will become of the sons and daughters of God.’ ”

 Now, let’s go. I’ll meet you there. But first I need to pray….