

## Living as Easter People: Resurrection for the Rest of Us Church on Fire!

Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2009

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Acts 2:1-21** When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. <sup>2</sup>And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. <sup>3</sup>Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. <sup>4</sup>All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

<sup>5</sup>Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. <sup>6</sup>And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. <sup>7</sup>Amazed and astonished, they asked, "Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?" <sup>8</sup>And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? <sup>9</sup>Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, <sup>10</sup>Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, <sup>11</sup>Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power." <sup>12</sup>All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, "What does this mean?" <sup>13</sup>But others sneered and said, "They are filled with new wine."

<sup>14</sup>But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them, "Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. <sup>15</sup>Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. <sup>16</sup>No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel: <sup>17</sup>In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams. <sup>18</sup>Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy. <sup>19</sup>And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist. <sup>20</sup>The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood, before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day. <sup>21</sup>Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

I love Pentecost! It ranks right up there with Christmas and Easter for me. I've always felt a bit like a nerd about that fact until recently when a friend of mine - another minister - confessed to me that Pentecost was his favorite holiday. Part of why I like Pentecost so much is because of its emphasis on the power that God's spirit brings - the power to do amazing things. And that excites me and always gives me hope. It's kind of like when I was younger, fall was absolutely my favorite time of the year because it was a new beginning, a fresh start, another chance to learn and grow and accomplish more. Well, Pentecost is that kind of thing in the life of the church. It is a reminder that we are given a new beginning, a fresh start, another chance to learn and grow and accomplish more and to become even better than we are now. It is a celebration that God gives us power to create and imagine and realize things that formerly may have seemed impossible and yet, when we open ourselves to God's power, somehow we have the energy and resources we need to do great things.

The story of Pentecost is found in the second chapter of the book of Acts. A small band of Jesus' disciples are gathered waiting for something to happen; waiting and praying for the "what's next" plan when, we are told, the power of God's spirit bursts upon them, fire dancing upon their heads, speaking in ways they had never before imagined. The force of the spirit was so immense it moved them out of the place they had gathered and out onto the street so they could share their experience - the fire dancing on their heads was now within them and things made sense and their mission seemed more clear and they left the huddle and went out to share.

As they shared their experience of God's power and presence, others were drawn to hear more, others wanted to be part of this "God thing," others wanted to experience the amazing power of God. And so Peter began to preach to the crowd that gathered. And in his sermon he quotes scripture as he says, "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams."<sup>18</sup> Even upon my

slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy."

The spirit emboldens the people of God, it animates us and allows us to see things in new ways and to imagine things different than they are and gives us the power to move out in faith that "God will provide" vision and purpose and meaning and wisdom and the words to make sense of it all. The spirit empowers the church to grow and spread the message of God's kingdom and, in the words of Star Trek, "to boldly go where no one has gone before." (Okay, I saw the new Star Trek movie last week.) And this is possible when we allow the spirit to lead us and guide us and move us outside our comfort zones to a place where others may think we're loopy, yet be inspired by God's spirit emanating from us.

Three and a half years ago, when I was interviewing with the Search and Call Committee here at First Christian Church, I heard the people on that committee share their visions and dreams. They talked about how they'd like to be a place where children are welcome and

able to grow in faith and love. They shared their dream of a ministry to and with Iowa State Students. They spoke of a desire to grow in terms of more people being part of this fellowship. And I believed them. And I accepted a call to be a minister here. And soon after I began my ministry with you I invited you to gather together in groups of six to eight people in the parlor (in what I called "Parlor Meetings"). In those meetings you told me the stories of your faith and what brought you here and your dreams and visions for First Christian Church. And I heard the dream of a filled sanctuary and children running everywhere and Iowa State students and lively music in worship and deepening friendships among people and greater knowledge of the bible and issues of faith and practice. And I heard stories of the love and care experienced and how you want others to have such a wonderful church community where you are accepted and loved and where you grow in understanding and in spirit and in relationship to God and one another.

Last fall, then Board Chair Larry Mesenbrink asked the Board to do some visioning and dreaming about what kind of church we want to be and how to become that kind of church. And beautiful thoughts were shared about how we want to be a community that is gathered by the love of God in Jesus Christ and to be witnesses to God's love to one another and to the world. We want to be growing spiritually through worship and prayer and fellowship and understanding and studying the bible and theology and thinking about and asking important questions. We desire to be a place where all are welcome and where we are united in Christ, but we have a diverse understanding on many things. This is a place where we can think and discuss and ask questions and struggle and listen and disagree or agree, but still respect and love one another just as God loves us. We dream of being the kind of church where people feel the Spirit alive and moving. We envision a church where we work together in acts of compassion and mercy and justice; where we get our hands dirty doing ministry that changes lives and offers hope and healing and connection, making real God's love.

We live in times when people are searching for something. They aren't necessarily looking for a church - a religious institution to join. They are looking for connections that are real - both to God and to others. They are looking for ways to be involved in meaningful work that makes a difference for the good. They are looking for a community that encourages them to become better, more caring and loving people. These are great times to be a faith community. But they are challenging as well. The old ways of doing and being church don't work like they used to and we need to invite the spirit of God to help us imagine and dream new ways to worship and gather and minister.

So I have a Pentecost challenge for each one of you here. I am asking you to pray that the Spirit would ignite a fire in us as happened on that first Pentecost. I want you to invite the Spirit of God to move us and give us visions and dreams of amazing things we didn't think possible before. I want you to open yourself to dream big and allow yourself for a moment to assume God will help us overcome the obstacles of making those big dreams a reality. And I want you to

write things down and send me notes or emails. This is not a Christmas wish list. This is taking the spirit of God seriously and listening for what God might be trying to tell you. And I want you to imagine how *you* would be part of these big dreams and visions and how it might be the spark that ignites the fire of God's love and grace and hope and healing for Ames and Nevada and Gilbert and Boone and everywhere else we touch as a congregation.

On Pentecost, the sparks of those who knew Jesus were ignited which quickly grew into a flame and the church was on fire. There was a passion and an imperative to not stay huddled in a room together, but to go out into the community and into the world and share the life-giving message and values and practices of Jesus. It just made sense. It was real. It was powerful. It was amazing what God's power made possible for those willing to be open to see it and follow it and imagine it and dream it.

Each week in the month of June, we're going to imagine a church on fire with the Holy Spirit. We begin next week as we see how vital

breaking bread is to God's community of love and grace. And, in order to make that concrete and visible, you are invited to bring food for the Mica Food Pantry and put it in the laundry baskets you'll find at each entrance. Bring what you can... if you can be generous, bring bags full of food and personal care items to help those in need. Allow the Spirit to move you to help act on behalf of others.

The possibilities for the future of First Christian Church are full and rich and amazing and big! But we need to spend some time allowing the Spirit of God to give us the visions and dreams that will allow God's message to speak to a new generation through us. Let's see what we might come up with. Let's see how God may speak to us. As a way to get us started, I invite you to read again, the responsive Pentecost Prayer printed in your bulletin.

One: Spirit. Fire. Power. Energy.

All: **You are our creator and we praise you.**

One: Come and riot in our souls with your intensity, and spin new possibilities within us.

One: Spirit. Guide. Promise. Wisdom.

All: **You are the wise one, and we praise you.**

One: Come and surprise our souls with your effervescence, and  
create a new marvel, within us.

One: Spirit. Peacemaker. Truth-teller. World-builder.

All: **You are the subversive dove, and we praise you.**

One: Come and cause uproar in our souls with your peace, and  
birth a new reality, within us.

All: **Amen.**

## Church on Fire! - Breaking Bread 6-7-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Acts 2:41-47** <sup>41</sup> So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that day about three thousand persons were added.

<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. <sup>43</sup> Awe came upon everyone, because many wonders and signs were being done by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All who believed were together and had all things in common; <sup>45</sup> they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. <sup>46</sup> Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved.

Last week we celebrated Pentecost, the birthday of the church, the moment when the spark within those who had followed Jesus ignited and set the church on fire with a passion and a purpose that was contagious. All through the month of June we'll try to experience that Pentecost fire as we imagine what might happen at First Christian Church as the sparks of faith and insight and openness to the spirit

ignite and set this church on fire. (I am speaking metaphorically, of course!)

As the story goes in Acts, Jesus' disciple, Peter, in his excitement, preached with a passion and conviction that was contagious. Many - the story says 3000 - were caught up in the spirit of what was happening and wanted to be part of this movement, and so they were baptized. Now, as I always tell those preparing for baptism, it is the beginning of something, not an end. And so it was with these fired-up faithful. They were moved by the story of Jesus' life, his teachings, his liberating gospel, and they decided to give themselves to this way of being. And now comes the hard part. The "what next?"

Again we turn to the story in Acts. We are told these followers of Jesus' way gathered together - a lot! - and devoted themselves to learning more of the stories and teachings of Jesus, they ate together and got to know one another as they encountered scripture, prayed, and as they shared with one another so that no one lacked for anything.

These seven little verses in Acts tell us a great deal about the workings of a church on fire.

The first thing you realize is that we are talking about a community, not individuals. Jesus' ministry was one of bringing people together and removing barriers to make that easier. He gathered people together, ate with groups of people, taught in groups, healed and gave hope as part of a larger picture. He understood that in order to sustain the life-changing power of God's love, it takes a community of committed people worshiping together, praying, studying, learning, questioning, growing, eating, healing, caring and sharing of their resources *in community* as well as outreach beyond the community. The Apostle Paul aptly calls this gathered church the Body of Christ - many parts but one body - that's how it works.

There is a story that makes this point and it even uses the fire imagery we've got going.

A member of a certain church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the preacher decided to visit him.

It was a chilly evening. The preacher found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his preacher's visit, the man welcomed her, led her to a comfortable chair near the fireplace and waited.

The preacher made herself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, she contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the preacher took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone then she sat back in her chair, still silent.

The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow and then its fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. The preacher glanced at her watch and realized it was time to leave. She slowly stood up, picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of

the fire. Immediately it began to glow, once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it.

As the preacher reached the door to leave, her host said with a tear running down his cheek, 'Thank you so much for your visit and especially for the fiery sermon. I shall be back in church next Sunday.'

This story is not about rules or shoulds or oughts. Rather it illustrates a truth about living in the way of Jesus. It takes all of us gathering together and opening ourselves to the spirit of God in our midst. We gather asking questions, learning the stories of faith, sharing what we have, and caring for one another. Gathered together, we find meaning and strength as we wrestle with making faith and life one. Together, we work and serve. And gathered around the table, we break bread and discover the nourishment we need to be the church and the people God calls us to be.

Jesus was the love of God embodied. In the person of Jesus body and spirit were made one. He cared not just about people's spiritual lives, but understood that people could experience God as

they were fed or healed or set free from structures that bound them. Today, as we think about those early followers of Jesus breaking bread, we remember how many stories of Jesus are centered around eating. Jesus ate with sinners and prostitutes and tax collectors and religious officials alike. He leveled the table as it were and disregarded social norms about who he should or should not eat with. Even when the crowds gathered on the hillside to hear Jesus teach, rather than disperse people to go find their own food, he used the moment as an opportunity to demonstrate the power of God's blessing as people gather together and share. Jesus brought together physical food and spiritual food. It's no wonder the early church ate together just about every time they gathered. It's no wonder they all shared what they had and made sure no one went hungry. They were living the new way Jesus had taught them to live. That kept the fire burning allowing them to continue the work of Jesus in the world even after he was gone.

Okay, if you will, I'm going to take a leap now. You may have noticed that we share bread and cup every time we gather at First Christian Church just like they did in the church of Acts. There is a story from Disciples of Christ history that fits and helps illustrate the importance of breaking bread in the spirit of Jesus. One of the founders of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is a man by the name of Alexander Campbell. Campbell was a young man, a graduate of the University of Glasgow, Scotland and member of the Church of Scotland or Presbyterian.

At that time, the Church of Scotland had quite an extensive ritual to determine who was worthy to take communion (which, by the way, they only had about twice a year). In order to take communion, you had to be given a token by the clergy. In order to receive a token, you had to go through a period of examination and questioning and pass the muster of the residing clergy and elders. No token, no communion because you were not considered worthy.

This ritual just didn't sit well with Alexander Campbell. And so, on that fateful day in May 1809, 200 years ago, a very disturbed Campbell arrived with his token to receive communion. But he couldn't bring himself to sit down. He kept going to the back of the line trying to decide what to do. This was very difficult. Finally, he sat down. The plate was passed, and the moment of decision was upon young Campbell. He took that token - a sign of his own worthiness in the eyes of the church - and he threw it into the plate, got up and walked out without taking communion. You see, the Jesus he discovered in scripture would never expect proof that a person was good enough to eat at his table. Though it would take many years and crossing the ocean to the new world, that day marked the beginning of a movement to recover the spark and ignite the flame of the first church that gathered and broke bread and welcomed all in celebration of God's amazing love and grace.

Fast forward to our time. As I have listened to people try to figure out which church I was pastor of, so often it comes down to

this, "Oh is that the church that has the community-wide Thanksgiving dinner?" And then I usually hear a story about how they or a family member or friend love to come to the dinner either to eat or volunteer or both! So, if we are known for one thing, it is eating together. If people in the community know nothing else about us, they know that this is the place to be on Thanksgiving. They know that here they can be part of breaking bread across all the divisions - heck, you don't even have to be a meat eater to eat with this bunch, and there are literally rich and poor, church people and people for whom church is not much on the horizon and people of other faith traditions, and here we gather to serve and share and break bread with friends and neighbors and strangers. And in breaking bread across the divide we are changed and God's love fills us all and we are satisfied and blessed and strengthened for the journey.

You've got to feed the fire to keep it going. And so we continue to gather together to listen and learn and speak, to give and receive care and support, to build a community of love and service where God's

love comes alive and grows and spreads and makes the world more like heaven on earth. May we be fed by God's love and nourished by God's spirit strengthening us for the journey as God's people. Amen.

## Church on Fire! - On the Road 6-14-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Luke 10:1-12** After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. <sup>2</sup>He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. <sup>3</sup>Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. <sup>4</sup>Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. <sup>5</sup>Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' <sup>6</sup>And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. <sup>7</sup>Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. <sup>8</sup>Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; <sup>9</sup>cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' <sup>10</sup>But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, <sup>11</sup>'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' <sup>12</sup>I tell you, on that day it will be more tolerable for Sodom than for that town.

The church board has been engaged in conversation around who we want to be as a church. Last Monday night, they discussed a statement that tried to distill the previous conversations. The statement says we are students of Jesus who did not start a religion,

but launched a movement and says, "Come, follow me." Jesus was always on the move, emboldened by the much needed message of God's extravagant love, freely given, available to all, able to break down any barriers people put up to separate one from another.

Jesus didn't set up shop, so to speak. He didn't construct an office or building where people could come to him... a place where he could dispense grace to those who could find him. Jesus operated within his Jewish faith tradition, but he transformed it and gave it life as he took it to the streets and roads beyond Jerusalem declaring that God's love is not just for the chosen ones, but extends to all. He made an intentional choice to emphasize compassion over purity, spirit over law, the deeper meaning of God's intention over strict adherence to tradition.

Last week we remembered how Jesus ate with all kinds of people, even those custom would say he shouldn't have. That was, of course, intentional as a demonstration of God's extravagant love that is not earned, but rather freely given. And if we have freely received that

love, of course, we would freely give. And in so doing, we become agents of God's grace, and part of the answer to the prayer that God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Today, we see another way Jesus broke with tradition in order to reveal a truth about the nature of God. In Jesus' day, the temple was considered the place of God's presence. All faithful Jews would be required to come to the temple and to offer their sacrifices to God. And there, the religious leaders would mediate one's relationship with God. This created a great hardship for many who had little or no way to follow through with these requirements. So here comes Jesus on the road, traveling from place to place speaking of the kingdom of God being in our midst, God's presence being not confined to the temple, but right there among the people.

Jesus realizes people learn by doing and so, the gospel story tells us, Jesus sends the disciples out to go where the people are. And he tells them two things. 1.) Jesus tells his followers to go empty handed. And, 2.) Receive the hospitality of those who receive you.

Take nothing?! No money, no belongings, not even shoes?! What's that about? What could Jesus be thinking? I suspect it may have to do with focus and energy. Have you ever gone on a mission trip or traveled in a way that you had to carry everything you brought with you? Maybe you've been backpacking in the mountains and you literally had to carry all your possessions, including your trash with you.

I spent some time in Guatemala a few years back. I had to carry everything in one over-the-shoulder duffle bag keeping one hand free to catch a moving bus or pick-up truck. There were no carts with wheels. There was no one waiting on me. It's not that the people weren't gracious, but everyone had their own burdens to carry from place to place and they simply couldn't add mine to theirs. There's another dynamic. The more stuff I have, the more people see me as a rich American and are not be able to connect with me as one human to another. And the more stuff I have, the less energy I have to encounter others with open arms and hear their stories.

So let's take this idea of being sent with nothing to weigh us down and think about how it might speak to us as a church. Can we be honest? We have been living in times of great excess in our culture. So much focus goes into food and possessions and money and accumulation of stuff. And that accumulation can include some stuff we do in the church that weighs us down and makes it difficult for us to follow Jesus on the road. The stuff is not the point. It is not where God's love is made known. And the stuff can serve as a substitute for the real thing. So do you suppose Jesus just might be calling us to move outside the church and take a road trip to the places where people are found, being careful to leave our baggage behind and opening ourselves to God's presence as we encounter others.

The church, as an institution, has spent a great deal of energy in thinking that we have the answers that other people need. But what if we started operating out of a different vision. What if we take our faith to the streets in an interactive way where we listen to others and pay attention to where we see God, helping make a real connection in a

way that respects and honors how God is already at work within the other. This week I couldn't help wonder how different things would be if Randall Terry had invited Dr. George Tiller to dinner and listened to his story and perspective instead of killing him. I know that's an extreme example, but it demonstrates the different perspective Jesus came to show us and yet how confused people get about that.

When we sit down with others we don't just learn about them, we learn something about ourselves and how God works. It reminds me of Beyond Welfare, a local organization whose goal it is to accompany people who are poor on a journey to make their lives better. The idea is that by strengthening connections between people - both poor people and people who have more resources - all are better because of their relationships. It is different than the idea of a handout. The success of the organization depends on deepening relationships so that the idea of "haves" and "have nots" no longer makes sense. In coming together, each person is enriched because each has gifts to offer as well as areas of need. Our approach to sharing the gospel could take on this

kind of attitude. It's not that we have God or Jesus or THE answer, but we do have something important. And, when we see God at work in the lives of others with different perspectives and different experiences, we deepen our relationship to both God and others.

Have you seen the movie adaptation of Jane Austen's book, Emma. Emma (played by Gwyneth Paltrow) is a young, well-to-do English woman. She often visits a poor woman and her mother. That is expected for someone of her position and stature, after all. One day, in front of other more wealthy people, she insults this woman by a comment she makes. Later Emma is reprimanded by a friend and feels terrible. She tries to make amends, but she deeply offended this poor woman. When her father tries to brag about how kind Emma is to go visit the poor woman, Emma interrupts him and says, "I have given them charity, but not kindness." In other words, "I have given them a hand out so that I can feel good about myself, but I have not given of myself to them." God is present as we come, empty, and encounter

others hearing their stories and struggles, and sharing with them as ones created and loved by God.

And that brings us to the second point which is to receive the hospitality of others. We have heard "it is better to give than to receive" so much that we can overlook the value of graciously receiving the kindness and hospitality of others. I learned this lesson in Guatemala. There I was, rich compared to my hosts, and yet, they would get out the very best of what they had, cook up the last egg, or fry up a huge batch of tortillas. I needed to receive it graciously because receiving hospitality is a way to show respect and to honor another's dignity. Everyone needs to give as well as receive - even those in poverty. That whole experience was a lesson in amazing generosity kind of like Jesus' story of the widow who gave nearly all she had. Everyone has something to give.

The church is going through a transition in our time. The church used to be the center of community life. Open the doors and people come. But those days are gone. There are many *more* people not

participating in a community of faith than who are. So our practices and attitudes are going to have to change so that the good news of God's love and grace can be experienced and claimed for a new generation. Jesus' sending his followers out on the road, light, unburdened, just powered by God's spirit surely holds at least part of the answer.

Patrick Keifert, a professor at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, MN says this: "We need to become the church sent even more than the church gathered. The future of the world and the church will depend more on the hospitality we receive from strangers than on the hospitality we give to them. Receiving what they have to offer - especially listening to their stories - and extending to them the grace of God."

A church on fire with a vision of the world as God desires is one that doesn't wait for people to find us, but rather is on the road open to God's transforming power at work again and again bringing people to do amazing things by the power of love and grace. So, whether you

ride your bike or walk or dance or drive... let's follow Jesus and take it  
on the road. Amen.

## Church on Fire! - One Family 6-21-09

By Mary Jane Button-Harrison

**Mark 3:31-35** “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

**Galatians 3:27-29** “As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.

Family! You’ve got to love them. It’s kind of like the line from the movie, French Kiss, when Meg Ryan’s character asks Kevin Kline’s character if he believes in love. Kline responds, “I love my mother.” To which Ryan says, “Everybody loves their mother. Even people who hate their mother love their mother.” Everybody loves their family. Even if they drive you crazy, you’ve just got to love them!

We spend most of our lives and much of our energy on our family. When we're young, we are dependent on our family to learn how to be in the world and what's important. Hopefully, we find our security in our family through a good home environment and the love and care we receive. Sadly, that is not the case for all children. And all of us experience both joy and struggle as we navigate life as part of a family system. When we become an adult, we can make choices about how we continue to relate to our family and what values and practices we will carry on and what values and practices we will discard. If we have children or maybe even if we don't, we start the imperfect process of forming and living as family all over again, but with much more responsibility. Now we spend much if not most of our time attending to and providing for our children or other family members and the cycle goes on.

You've got to love your family. But sometimes it is hard, isn't it? One of the great privileges of being a minister is that you get to be with families during significant passages of life. And that allows me a

window into the life of families making obvious that family can be both a blessing and a curse. For some, there is tremendous comfort to be surrounded by family members as we mourn the loss of one of the family, say a mother or father. For others, being around family at a time of loss is quite painful for it reminds them of the hurts and unresolved issues either with their parent or the ones who remain.

Let me tell you, after witnessing the joy and pain of family in times of grief, I decided many years ago that I had better come to terms with my own family and I decided to take responsibility for my own feelings and attitudes changing what I could change and letting go of what I couldn't. If you haven't done that with your family, I highly recommend it. You've got to love your family.

In recent years, there's been a lot of focus and conversation and debate about what constitutes a family. And we've heard phrases like "Christian Family Values" from organizations like "Focus on the Family" and the like. So often these organizations have a narrow view of family and what makes up a family. There's a whole system of rules and

regulations about family. But the truth is, while there may be some value in what is said, none of it is based on the teachings of Jesus. If anything, focusing on the proper make-up of a family is in direct contrast to Jesus and it misses the point.

Jesus says something like Meg Ryan. He says there is nothing extraordinary about loving your family; loving those who love you. Everyone does that... even those who don't give two hoots about God or God's ways love their family and friends and people like them... people they are comfortable with. That is not a Christian value. It is a human value and it crosses all religions and non-religions. We humans tend to be tribal, and that is kind of what we are talking about when we think about family and extended family. We love and care for and look out for and make great sacrifices to make sure life is good for our family.

Jesus puts a new twist on what constitutes family. When his mother and brothers and sisters come to see him one day, Jesus uses it as an opportunity to change the way people perceive value and worth and connection and family. "Who are my mother and my brothers?..."

Whoever does the will of God..." It is not bloodline that is the ultimate form of family. It is participation in the kingdom of God. It is responding to the call of God in your life and claiming your identity as a child of God. That, in Jesus' way, become primary.

In Jesus' time, the worth and value of a woman was measured by her children, especially her ability to have sons. Having a male child was the Social Security of that day. She was hardly considered a moral agent or actor. Jesus changed all that. Jesus valued the company and perspective of women and men, poor and well off, Jews and Gentiles. About all those barriers based on accidents of birth or situation of life Jesus had little concern. His concern was to have people hear and respond to the liberating gospel - good news of God's love and grace. Jesus' concern was to have co-laborers to make real God's vision and rule in the world.

Jesus did care about family. But his vision of family wasn't a mother and a father and 2.5 children. His vision of family was a community of care that is not tribal and that is open to anyone without

regard to their qualifications or name or bloodline or station. Don't get me wrong, I don't think Jesus was against the family unit so long as that wasn't the end-all, be-all. Family can be a closed system or an open system. Family can be selfish or it can be giving. Family can be narrowly defined, or broadly cast. Jesus suggested that following him involved a BIG view of family. Galatians tells us that living in Christ, we are all heirs to the promises of God... we are one family, God's family. Now that's a big family.

My youngest sister, Paula, is 9 years younger than I am. When she was young we lived in Council Bluffs where my dad served as minister of Broadway Christian Church. One Sunday, on the way home from church Paula piped up, "Why is everyone always so delighted to see me?" she asked. What a wonderful question coming from this preschooler! Whenever she went to church she encountered smiles and expressions of interest and delight and from all these people who were not blood family, but a different kind of family. The kind of family that doesn't have to love you, but they do! They do as a matter of

principle; as a matter of character because they follow the one who joins us all together as family; heirs to the promises of God. They do love you because they are overflowing with God's love themselves and that love can't help but land on anyone who comes around.

I've been told that some Sundays there's a group on the north side of the sanctuary who somehow miss out on the sermon because they are taking such delight in the children who sit over there. I think it would be great if those children leave this place and wonder why everyone is always so delighted to see them... even those who aren't part of their family by blood or adoption, but still act like family none-the-less.

The thing about family as Jesus envisioned it, is that it defies traditional ways of looking at things. Just as I love my children and want good things for them, as I follow Jesus, I realize that, in a sense, all children are my children and need my protection and care. The same kind of love I extend to my "own" children I can extend to others as well. Several months ago I officiated at a funeral for a woman who was

not a member of this church. In fact, she didn't have a church family. She had been married a couple of times and had children with each husband. As I sat and listened to these children of different fathers, talk about their mother I thought about how Christ-like she was in some very significant ways. You see, she was a good mother. She nurtured her children and fed them and corrected them when they needed it and shared stories with them and expected much from them and offered much forgiveness and grace to them. She cared deeply for her children as was evident in the memories shared. But the amazing thing about that was her children by birth basically told me that she considered anyone who walked through her door to be her child and she treated them all equally. They were all her children! At the funeral there were many young people who told me she was like a mother to them and they grieved and yet were so grateful to this woman who had, in some way, been the face of God to them.

The problem with the metaphor of family for church is the danger that a congregation might become tribal and not really be open

to whoever might choose to join the family. But as long as we understand that we are a growing, welcoming, open family that always has room for one more... always has a place at the table... always delights in the ways in which we are all enriched by the presence of more and diverse people among us, then family can work. Jesus' family values were that whatever form family takes it be open to hearing and acting on God's visions and dreams for the world. That means we are family with others near and far, friends and strangers, and even enemies. That means we love, and care for, and go to bat for all kinds of people in all kinds of situations and that we open our homes and hearts and church building to God's presence in surprising and mysterious and wonderful ways. That means we can lean on each other and lighten one another's load and give and forgive as we share the road, following Jesus' way of self-giving, wide-reaching, all-encompassing love. We are one big family, children of a loving parent. May we grow in faith and love and in giving to the world we encounter in God's name. Amen.