

Water is Thicker than Blood
Romans 5:1-7

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When I was worshipping in a small English parish church recently, choking my way through the incense, I was seated by a young college student. You have to know how dramatically she stood out compared to her other aging compadres in the pews. I have to say that the congregation was just stellar in the way they attended to her. She attended Leicester University and came from a little rural village in Yorkshire, there where she grew up in her small town church. And here in the city of her university she had sought out a congregation.

I talked to her at the coffee fellowship after the service. This was home for her, the Anglican ritual and sense of Christian community. Here in a place far from home among strangers who were not of her generation she found connection, belonging and an anchor of spiritual meaning.

I asked her about her student friends. I guessed that she was in an extreme minority of those of her age

who participated in the Christian life or Christian community and I guessed right. She said that of all her friends and acquaintances at university, she knew of only one other student who was a practicing Christian, a Roman Catholic lad from Ireland. The rest couldn't possibly imagine why she bothered.

This young woman was the exemplar of a person of faith who, as an extreme minority, found spiritual community that was far removed from her blood family or generational cohort of friends. And she wasn't there asking the church to change to accommodate her according to her likes and tastes. She was there, I believe, hoping that the church would be the church so she could find her anchor in the storm.

The relationship she found was neither one of blood kinship nor a tribe of sameness. The relationship she found was born of water - baptismal waters - and the transcendent power they shared together.

Blood is often thicker than water when it comes to what we value, what we seek, and what we are willing to sacrifice for. But in her case and in the case of millions of Christians through the centuries water has been thicker than blood.

It's easy to explain the draw of small family church in which every member is somehow related to you by blood and your family name is all over the tombstones out in the church graveyard. It's easy to explain how ethnic churches leverage being part of the same cultural group.

But it is not so easy to explain how a gathering of strangers who are unlike one another in almost every way are united in faith. That is true evidence of the working of the spirit because it is not reliant on other forms of affiliation, most usually sameness. The evidence of the Spirit is not when birds of a feather flock together, but rather when diverse people gather and experience oneness.

Some of you are familiar with the little General Store restaurant in Rocheport.

Every Thursday night there is a common meal to which the whole community is invited and there is always exactly one menu item for the evening. The waitress comes over to your table and asks, "Do you want the special?" Your answer can only be "yes" because that's all they are serving. "Yes, I'll have the special and a glass of tea." So everyone is having the same meal, a menu that changes week to week.

Out front on the sidewalk they have a whimsical sandwich board that appears from time to time. It is designed like a check-off sheet with boxes beside three choices. The first two boxes are unchecked: "Democrat" and "Republican." The third box IS checked: "Having a glass of wine." **(INSERT SLIDE)**

Their funny but provocative sign makes a subtle statement: The ties that bind are found beyond common affiliations. That signboard could almost become our standard invitation to communion – Neither this nor that, we're having a chalice of wine. **(TURN OFF SLIDE)**

The way the apostle Paul gets to this understanding of one family not defined by kinship, by blood, is this:

You may not know it but you are already connected to God by virtue of being alive, because of the grace of God you glimpse of in Christ, through the doorway he has opened for you so you can see it. If only you open your inward eyes you will see just how connected to God and one another you really are. And once that happens you will feel the harmony, the rightness of your place in life and everybody else's too. You are linked by something more than blood and more than sameness. You are linked by the mystery and creative spirit of life.

When you discover that, the more you awaken to that, then the more hope you have in sharing in the glory of it. If the sacred is a glowing ember you glow when you behold it. It even changes your understanding of suffering and how even that has a transforming role to play.

When the college girl left church that day she said with her thick Yorkshire dialect, "The school term is ending now and I'll go back to Yorkshire for the summer. But I'll be back in the fall."

Everybody told her to have a great break and they would look forward to seeing her when she came back to school. And the congregants who said that to her were not only the traditional English stock you might be thinking of, but also Philipinos, Africans and Asians. And why were they there? Because they were joined together not by sameness or nationality or age or ethnicity or blood. They were joined by the waters of baptism, a transcendent referent.

As I consider our little community at Broadway and the ties that bind, I know that some secondary connections bind us together – like family, or common work, or children together, or even a common culture. But the most important thing transcends all these.

The most important thing is not common family blood but the blood of Christ. Sameness is not the bond that holds us together as much as the Spirit creating unity out of our beautiful diversity. It is, after all, the Spirit that creates us, calls us, and makes us one people out of many.

Years ago I was in Israel doing some graduate work on a summer archaeological dig. It was a pretty secular environment and a very small minority of practicing Christians were participating. After a while you start to miss and long for Christian community and I remember the day that the word started circulating among the few of us that on the Sabbath evening we were going to have a communion service for anyone who wanted to come. That evening no more than eight of us from different nations gathered at the seaside and found bread and wine resting upon an ancient Roman pillar. And in the simplest way you can imagine, we remembered Jesus and ate with glad and generous hearts. We were not joined together by blood, but rather by water and the Spirit.

One time when we were serving on a mission team in the Andes mountains of Ecuador, word came to us that the servant woman of a secular Danish landowner wanted her baby baptized. The Dane couldn't care less about baptism, but he did care about the woman who worked his place. And he asked us to consider helping her. She was a woman of little reputation, rejected by local churches in the area. And we gathered around in a small circle, sang songs about Wading in the Water, and poured water over this crying little Indian baby. The mother cried, the Danish land owner said that was a very decent thing for us to do, but what I remember was the baptismal formula I pronounced being translated into both Spanish and Quichua so all could hear this little one was washed in the waters of the creator, son and spirit. We were not joined together by blood up on that windy Ecuadoran hill, but rather by water and the spirit.

The older I get the more I treasure the kind of ties that are the product of blood family. Those ties, for me provide a great sense of belonging and love.

But also the older I get the more I treasure what transcends blood ties and sameness, the universal activity of the spirit that draws together strangers to make us one, splashes us with the water of baptism, gathers us around one table where we lift a chalice filled with wine of the spirit, and sends us off in the world to follow the ways of the Jesus that often do not resemble the ways of the world.

That kind of unity comes as a gift of God and has become ever more precious to me. It reminds me that the visible church of Jesus Christ is found many places wherever two or three are gathered in his name, when the language of faith has the ability to pull together those who speak in different languages, and sharing life in solidarity with others can transform us. And that should lead us to an even larger sense of the world and who is my neighbor.

I might have a family and little tribes of which I'm a part that I treasure, but the big tribe of God's family supersedes and informs every other one. It is that vision that is especially important now.

We live in a time in which centripetal force is spinning people and groups out into an increasingly fragmented tribalism. Part of being human is to recognize that we are tribal by nature. But the problem with spinning down into an absolute tribalism is that the more tribal you get the more protective you become of your own and less concerned with the common good. This runs contrary to the vision of Jesus and the Christian message. The vision of Jesus is actually one that overcomes tribalism by sacrificial love.

The church in our time needs to become a harbinger of that vision of unity, justice and healing, proclaiming and describing the ways that the many may become one and, in the words of Jesus, becoming peacemakers to make it so. It is hard but exceedingly important work. By the grace of God we may continue to move faithfully down that path. If we boast, let it be in the glory of God at work among us and, if required, what we are willing to sacrifice on his account. For this is the noble and enduring sacrifice we may offer.