

July 13, 2008

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## MERIDIAN STREET UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

### **Family Matters: Loving the Outcast**

Numbers 12:1-15

There is at least one in most every extended family. You know who I mean. The odd uncle, the eccentric aunt, the cousin who is “a little different.” You may have a face come to mind right now in your own family - those relatives that are not part of the “in crowd” in a family. Then of course, there are those folks who marry into a family. This is a whole different category. A relative by blood, you may have to just grin and bear, but one who marries in, well, that one may or may not ever be accepted.

I met a woman in a little church in north-west Kansas. I asked her how long she had been a member of the church. She replied, “Well, I am a newcomer. I didn’t join this church until I married my husband.” I said, “Oh, are you newlyweds?” She replied, “We were 22 years ago.” I did not understand until she shared with me that anyone who was not third generation in that church was a newcomer and they might or might not be accepted.

So it is with those who marry into a family. A family takes a big risk when they let a “stranger” move into their midst. In the wedding ceremony in the United Methodist Church, a family blessing is often offered by the parents and extended families of the bride and groom. The words in this liturgy of blessing are: “The marriage of (Tom) and (Mary) unites two families and creates a new one. Will you offer them your love and support on this their wedding day and all the days of your life?”

A marriage does not just impact the bride and groom, but it affects the extended family. And as you well know, there are some family members who may not be delighted with the addition of a new family member. So it was with Moses’ older sister Miriam.

Miriam had watched over Moses since she was a child. She was devoted to her little brother and traveled with him through the Red Sea and into the long journey through the desert toward the land God promised. She was also the one, as we heard in the reading this morning, who began to criticize Moses when he married a Cushite woman.

We do not know much about this wife of Moses. She was from Ethiopia. Tradition holds that her father may have been a king of a gentile tribe and she, then, a princess. It is often said of this woman that she was extremely beautiful. Miriam, however, is distressed. Moses’ sister is appalled by the marriage of her brother. I would venture that Miriam’s anger is based on the fact that the Cushite woman is not an Israelite, she was from a polytheistic culture, and she was dark skinned and maybe she was just a little jealous of this woman’s beauty and place in Moses’ heart and attention. In Miriam’s mind, this new wife is an outcast, not to be trusted, and certainly not to be welcomed into the family.

Miriam and her other brother Aaron begin to talk against Moses. I have read that Miriam's name is listed first because she is the one who began the criticism. She is the one who instigated the angst. She is the one who pointed her finger at the Cushite woman and declared her unfit. Miriam becomes red in the face with anger. In her displeasure she begins to challenge the leadership of her brother Moses.

The prejudice she holds against Moses' wife blinds her to the relationship between Yahweh and Moses. A relationship that God has developed, nurtured and blessed not only with benefit to Moses but for the benefit of the Israelite people through Moses. Prejudice closes the mind and heart of Miriam.

The result – The anger of the Lord burns against her. These are not words anyone wants to hear, are they? In this case however, it is now Yahweh who, if you will, becomes red in the face.

Miriam was looking for a fight with Moses and ends up kindling the wrath of Almighty God! Her bigotry, her blindness and her single-mindedness angers God as she tries to discredit her brother. The cost of her bigotry and her betrayal of Moses is great. She, who considered the Ethiopian wife the outcast, becomes the outcast herself. Miriam is literally placed outside the community as a leper.

It is an image from the oldest of writings: those who are suffering from leprosy were kept away from the community. An article in Reuters in 2006 stated that in China 200,000 recovered lepers and their descendents live in leprosy villages with little or no hope of returning to society. Isolation has long been the response to leprosy and still is in parts of the world today.

Miriam, the right hand to Moses, the deeply devoted sister and supporter of her brother's leadership becomes the outcast as she turns against him. Her bigotry isolates **not** the one she considered unacceptable, her bigotry places her outside the community she loves.

Most every family has one who is not acceptable. It is often one who marries into the family who is not the *right* skin color, or does not have the *right* religion or the *right* education, or the *right* family background, or the *right* political party affiliations or the *right* look. There are a variety of reasons for family members to shun a newcomer. You may have experienced that very reality. Certainly the Cushite wife of Moses did. She was not the right religion, she was not the right race and she was not the right wife for Moses. Just ask Miriam.

Take note here. The true outcast is not Moses' wife; it is the one who allows her prejudice to blind her faith. God can no longer use Miriam because she has become preoccupied by her bigotry. Moses cries out on behalf of his sister and an entire nation waits for 7 days while Miriam is confined outside the camp. Her bigotry stops a nation in its tracks!

Hardness of heart is not a new reality in this world. We can turn against another for some of the most absurd reasons. Of course, if it is your heart and your reasons, they do not seem absurd. They seem rational and it is a wonder that everyone does not see the situation through your eyes.

We all have prejudice. We all have people or groups that we fear, that we don't understand, that we won't trust, but may we be clear that our prejudice, our bigotry can indeed stop families and nations in their tracks. The hardness of heart that develops from turning from others is a hardness that also separates us from God.

Last May, I heard Barbara Lundblad preach at a seminar in Minnesota. Lundblad is a professor of preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City. In her sermon, she referred to a passage in the book of Jeremiah. The passage speaks of the wrath of God toward a disobedient Jerusalem. In the passage, these words are found: "...they have no shame at all, they do not even know how to blush." Lundblad, among other points in a wonderful sermon, compared the color of anger to the color of blush. Anger often rises when we attempt to justify our thoughts and actions. Blushing comes when we know that we cannot justify our thoughts and actions. Anger makes us red in the face as we rail against another. Blushing colors our face as we experience shame.

Miriam was red in the face with rage. She felt no shame as she began to criticize her brother, God's chosen leader of Israel, God's confidante and beloved. Her anger separates her not only from her brother, but also from God. Fortunately for her, Moses immediately rushes to her aid.

We are all capable of prejudice. We all have people that we don't understand, that we actually fear and that we won't trust. Miriam's prejudice stopped an entire nation in its tracks. In many ways our prejudices have done the same. We cannot, we will not move forward as a nation, as a global community until we claim our hardness of heart and reach out to those we have shunned.

We are all in part a product of our culture. Unfortunately, we are often more a product of our culture than our faith. Our culture thrives on setting individual against individual and lumping people into groups and setting them against other people and groups.

Be honest with yourself in this moment. Has your heart become hardened against people of another skin color, people of a particular race, people who are poor, people who lack education, people of a particular political party, people from a particular part of this nation or another nation, people of another religion, people who are ill--mentally, emotionally, spiritually, or physically--people who have something you want? Be honest with yourself and name that prejudice. Be honest with yourself and in so doing, allow yourself to blush before your God. Trust me, I stand convicted too.

Miriam was given seven days outside the community to consider her sin. My guess is that none of us will be willing to direct that kind of time and energy to our own sin. However, every time we even think condescending thoughts about another, may we blush. Every time we respond in anger when another has not behaved to our expectations, may we blush. Every time we feel ourselves superior to another, may we blush.

May the color of shame, the blush of conviction, be the first step toward the change our faith demands.

Bitter divisions are still a part of our reality as a nation. We can try to wordsmith them away, to appear PC (politically correct), but when our prejudice blinds us to our faith, the one who becomes the outcast is our own self.

I read an article a little over a year ago about a situation at Clemson University. One of the young adults interviewed for the article is Ranniece McDonald, a chemical engineering student on that campus. She shares in the article that she was sitting with a group of students and commented on how difficult it was to be accepted into the chemical engineering school at Clemson. The response of one of the students in the group was that she probably got in because of affirmative action. Suddenly, she shared, all her years of hard work, all the good grades she received, all the years of study were reduced to nothing. The comment was bitterly painful to her. Several months later, pictures taken at an off campus party showed up on the internet. Many Clemson students attending the party were mocking African Americans in a variety of ways the night before Martin Luther King Day. The president of Clemson issued a statement expressing shock and disappointment with the students.

Miss McDonald is quoted in the story as saying: “You would think we have moved past things like this, but we haven’t. People have called for sanctions. But you can’t sanction stupid.”

You can’t sanction stupid. It is deeper than that though. The hardness of heart that develops over time, the walls that we build to keep others out, the mentality that we groom against others becomes natural to us over time. It shapes who we are in the present and who we are becoming.

May we have the wisdom to blush at our own sin and then open ourselves to the healing hand of God, for God alone can lead us into the desert of self reflection, offer us forgiveness and bring us back to community as restored. As the people of the resurrection, reconciliation is our mandate. We diminish our selves when we attempt to belittle, demean or shun others. God’s love is greater than our bigotry. God does indeed have the power to heal, to break the hardness of heart and restore us to God’s image.

For forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration we pray, O God. Hear our prayer, melt our hearts and change our ways. Amen