

Willow Glen UMC June 16, 2013 "Beyond the Brady Bunch"
Acts 2:43-47; Revelations 21:1-7

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that of the 117.5 million households in 2010, slightly less than half (58.4 million) had married couples in them. And of those, less than half (22.1 million) had children under the age of 15. So that means that less than a quarter of all households in the United States qualify as what we would call a "traditional family." [*Circuit Rider Magazine*, May/June/July 2013]

For churches called to do family ministry, this is a game-changing reality. On Father's Day, I thought it might be helpful to take some time to talk about what is happening with our families. At work, fathers are finding that they have to keep reinventing themselves if they want to keep a job. But what is true of the workplace is also true of home base. The changes in our economy and in our society are not sparing our families. Fathers aren't the only ones feeling like they have to reinvent family these days.

Unfortunately, we don't get a lot of direct guidance from the New Testament when it comes to creating families. After all, Jesus left his family. When his mother and brothers came looking for him, he basically disowned them. He gestured to his disciples and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" [Matthew 12:49] Following him, the disciples left their spouses. Paul never had a spouse. In fact, he preached celibacy. [1 Corinthians 7:32-38]

Fortunately, the New Testament does say a lot more about creating community. While Jesus was with them, the disciples' lives revolved around his personal presence. But when his physical body was gone, a spiritual body was born. That's what happened on Pentecost. This spiritual body was a brand new kind of community. It was called "church."

From the beginning, the church was truly a new creation. Nothing like it had ever existed before. It was a radical new way of being together. Church members, if you could call them that,

shared their possessions. They held all things in common. They sold what they didn't need and gave the proceeds to the needy. And they came together with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. [Acts 2:42-47]

Now you can see why the early Christians were persecuted! Because the church was challenging the very foundations of hierarchy and privilege and private property that society had been built upon. Nowhere else in the ancient world could Jew and Greek, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free come together and share so intimately with one another. The folks they'd been taught to have nothing to do with, now they were living with!

For a few centuries at least, the Christian Church was the counter-cultural movement in the Roman Empire. The Church completely redefined family. For perhaps the first time in

history, people who were unrelated by blood were now sisters and brothers by faith.

Reading these verses I got to thinking, if the church could redefine what family means in the first century, why can't we redefine it in the 21st century? And when I put my mind to it, I can think of several ways that the church can help us create family.

Here's an easy one: Because Hank's parents both died before Kristen was born and my parents live in Colorado, I really appreciated the older women and men in the Novato Church who adopted my daughter when she was three and became her surrogate grandmas and grandpas. (They listened to her stories, played Barbies with her, made applesauce with her.) I suspect that there are folks in this church who are missing their grandchildren, and there are children here who don't get to see their grandparents. And I hope you find each other.

Of course, our youth group is another way to be family. Teenagers need a lot of love. They need acceptance. They need forgiveness. They need adults with a lot of patience. And they don't always get that at home. More than that, they need a place to fit in, a safe place to dive in and explore who they are and who God is creating them to be.

But teens aren't the only ones who need love and acceptance and a place to belong. At Cambrian Park a couple of weeks ago, we had some visitors. Two women and their young son joined us for the Hope supper and worship service. We were all gathered in a circle and when it came time for personal prayers, one of them began to cry. You see, she was afraid that she and her partner would not be welcome there. But they had seen the rainbow at Almaden Hills and took a chance. Now they don't fit the traditional definition of family, so it meant the world to them to be welcomed into our Methodist family.

That got me to thinking about all the nontraditional families we have around here and the importance of church being a place where everyone can belong: young adults and singles, parents without partners, couples without kids, empty-nesters, people whose spouses are of another faith or no faith, widows and widowers, caregivers and all the others.

Everyone needs a family and sometimes we need a support system that is bigger than our nuclear families. I saw Claudia Pierson when she stopped by the church on her way home from the doctor's office on Thursday. Throughout the chemo, she wasn't able to come to church. So, after her last treatment, when she found out that her CAT Scan was normal, she came to give thanks. She knows the power of your prayers. She feels the strength of your love. That's a benefit of being a member of God's big family.

Another benefit the church can provide is sanctuary. We had the privilege of welcoming some refugees from Nepal and

Bhutan into our early service family. The Nepalese man was asked by Catholic Charities to be foster father to a girl and her two brothers, orphans from a refugee camp in neighboring Bhutan. The children spoke no English when the United Nations arranged for them to settle in San Jose. They were placed in an apartment on Brace Street and enrolled in Willow Glen schools.

Tej and the children showed up on our doorstep one Sunday morning, and we tried to figure out how to be family for them. Grace Praisewater greeted them. Atom Yee invited them to his home. Susan met with Catholic Charities and arranged some activities for the kids and signed them up for VBS and camp. We have just received news that the foster care situation didn't work out and that the siblings are being split up, two are going to the East Bay and one to South San Jose. Susan and I are so disappointed, because we know that this church could have been family for them, and we ask God if there is possibly a way to keep in contact with them.

Thank God that we, as United Methodists, believe in creating families even when we are far away. Today our youth group is settling in at their Next Step mission site on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota. A long way from home, our teens will have to be family for each other, but they will also be expanding their notion of family to include people who live on the reservation. We pray that awe will come upon everyone, that they will discover what they share in common, that our teens will not think about what they need, but how they can meet someone else's need, that they will eat their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. [Acts 2]

And this in from Alison Praisewater: After attending mission trips under the auspices of Next Step Ministries, our Alison got a job with them. And she has fallen in love with a group of children in Haiti. I'd like her proud father, Stan, to read from Alison's letter:

Returning to Fond Blanc Haiti was an amazing experience. I was overwhelmed as all the children came running out to me, remembering me and jumping on me, yelling my name.

It was like being reunited with family. I was sad to only spend three short days with them but happy to know I'll be back for a week later this month.

The night before I left, the children were asking Pastor Jean Claude to make me stay, thinking he had the power to do so. It breaks my heart to leave them. They love the new intern staff that will be living with them this summer, but it is clear that I have earned a special place in their hearts and it's definitely mutual.

Here are some specific prayers you can pray for them:

Protection- as we learn more about the community of Fond Blanc, I want to make sure that we are praying protection over these children. Physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

Health- There are many children that suffer from painful skin conditions, rashes, and mosquito bites that are infected and scabbed over. (One of my favorite moments of this last trip was cleaning out and bandaging a young boys leg. He was so precious and brave).

Love- These Children need to know they are loved. [We] have a creole speaking Next Step Staff member [who] has helped us tremendously in getting the stories from the children. Many of them still have living relatives yet they are sent away to live in an orphanage. They mourn the loss of their families. They crave love from anyone who will give it to them. Pray for them to feel love and acceptance. Pray that they understand they have a God that loves them. Pray that they would love one another as they can often be so violent when left to

fend for themselves. Pray that God's spirit would reign down on them and overwhelm that orphanage.

Impact- Pray that our impact would be positive. That we wouldn't overstep our boundaries or believe that we are "saviors" for this community. Let us serve humbly.

Love,
 Alison

These are not the only ways our church creates family, but I'm going to have to stop here. I just want to say that when we talk about family in the church, we go way beyond the Brady Bunch. For one thing, we know that not all of life has a laugh track and not all of our families' problems can be neatly resolved in a single episode. Furthermore, the girls are not always blond and cute. The boys are not always fresh-faced and fun. Not everyone has Alice for a maid. The house is not always clean. Dads and moms don't always get along. And we know that being a family doesn't always come with a theme song.

But here at Willow Glen, we also know this: the church will be here for you—welcoming, loving, challenging and supporting

you—until we all see what the author of Revelation sees—that new heaven and that new earth on its way—until that day when God moves in, makes a home with us, wipes away every tear from our eyes and takes away every pain from our heart, that day when there are no more Haiti's, no more poverty, no more orphans or refugees, no more divorce or disease, but only the fullness of life in God's family. Until that day, we have each other. Happy Father's Day.