

"ON BEING A MEMBER OF THE FAMILY"

INTRODUCTION

Bishop James Mathews of the Boston Area of the Methodist Church shared an experience recently with a group of us that I would like to now share with you. On one occasion while traveling in Europe, he stayed overnight with a Yugoslav pastor, his wife and three sons. Two of the sons were strong, handsome young men - attending the University, and the third son (20 years old) was emotionally and mentally retarded. While the rest of them sat around talking, he sat over in the corner playing with his toys. Before the Bishop departed, he asked if he might take a picture of the family (thinking of the parents and the two normal sons), and the father said, "Yes...of course, but wait a moment while I get him ready". So the picture was taken, with the retarded boy in the center. The Bishop said, "I never show that picture to anyone....I can't exploit human tragedy. But I learned something from that father about what it means to belong to the family. He wouldn't let even one be missing from that picture, not one, not even the idiot boy".

DEVELOPMENT

Pauls prays for us, as for the Ephesians, in the third chapter: "For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named...." Suppose we think about those words here today.

His words remind us that we belong to the family of the Father whose love reaches out to embrace every last and lost child on this earth; the family in which not even one is left out of the picture - not even the idiot child, nor the one who causes all the trouble, the one that brings sorrow, heartache and gray hairs, the one that has a baby out of wedlock, the one who has to get divorced, the one that has to go to prison, not even the rapist, nor the homosexual. We all belong to the human family, the family of God - the Father.

Carl Sandburg writes: "The first cry of a newborn baby in Chicago or Samboango, Amsterdam or Rangoon, has the same pitch and key in saying, 'I am, I have come through, I belong, I am a member of the family". That family of God, the Father in which not even one nation, nor one race, nor one religion shall be missing from the picture, from that whole family of mankind whose Father suffers for each child in that family.

Some of you may remember the movie, "The Pawnbroker" - that movie of Sol Masserman jammed in a truck with his wife with a baby in her arms, that truck with scores of other doomed fathers, wives and babies on its way to the ovens of Auschwitz. He, like all the men in the truck, strapped to the ceiling, and in the crush, his wife, the breath just crushed out of her, unable any longer to hold the baby - this father stands there and watches in horror as his baby slips down to the floor of the truck to be trampled to death, and there comes out of him as he hears the faint cry of the baby, such a cry of agony and suffering. The anguish of a father watching his child suffer - suffer in the home where perhaps hatred crackles between father and mother, brother and sister; suffering in the hospital with his curly hair charred to the roots by napalm burning, of flesh peeling off his face; suffering in a ghetto of hopeless rage and frustration and inferiority. The anguish and suffering of God, the Father, for his children.

Only when our pity, our concern, our compassion reaches out to embrace every child in this world, to feed, clothe and love it as though it were our very own, only then will we know what it is to pray: "Our Father, give all of us this day our daily bread. Forgive all of us our family hatreds, our ghetto guilt, our war fever". Martin Buber once said, "The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable". The Father's love reaches out to embrace the world, and to all the suffering children, he says: "You belong. You are a member of the family".

"that out of the riches of the Father's glory, he may grant you to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man". Suppose we think about these words and about what they suggest.

"Through his Spirit in the inner man". We belong to the family of the spirit, the spirit whose love reaches down to grasp the last and lost child imprisoned in its own being - that spirit that sets the prisoner free, that opens the floodgates to real life, to "community", that rushes past all the defenses we erect, that blows down the walls and barriers, that stirs deep within us that power of hope and new life. Yes - the spirit that gives power to see and to recognize the stranger as a member of the family of God.

A well-dressed, well mannered, middle aged woman stops off at Woolworth's at Third Avenue and 86th Street to make a small purchase. It's near lunch time. As she passes the food, she decides to stop and have a coke and sandwich. It's crowded. She mounts a leather stool. A big, burly mechanic sits next to her. "Hey Myrt" says the mechanic in a loud, gruff voice, "How's about a little extra service since I'm so good to you!" The broad, pockmarked face of the waitress softens under the heavy layers of creams and powders. "Fat chance" she answers as she puts a hot fudge sundae in front of the burly mechanic. He eats it like a glad animal who has never heard of calories and cholesterol. "Myrt" he says, "I gotta go now. Here's a dollar". She wipes her hands on her uniform, takes his dollar and rings up the sale. (Where...where am I in this Woolworth world? Me...with my different world of books, lectures, concerts, fancy stores, friends like myself.....but I don't want to be a stranger....give me a sign).

"Mey Myrt come here" says the mechanic softly, hand cupped beside his mouth, whispering it in such a way that all can hear him. (Ah...he is going to say something confidential to her and I'm afraid to hear it. He is probably going to proposition her.....and I don't want to hear it, and of all things....I don't want to miss it) "Listen" he says softly, "you give me a dime too much. Here count it". His palm holds out the change. "Yeh" she says. "You wanna watch that Myrt, you'll lose your job. Your boss won't like it". (Thanks.....I say wordlessly to the mechanic. I smile at him. His leathery face goes into nice creases as he grins back. He guesses I am just being friendly. I am....)

The spirit blows wherever it wants to in this Woolworth world....opening our eyes to discover brothers and sisters we haven't met before. The fellowship of the spirit has no walls - only windows and sometimes the shades go up and you find yourself looking at a brother or a sister - in the subway, restaurant, on the street - you smile, you nod, you go your way. Yes, the spirit gives us power to see and the power to come out into the open, to let ourselves go - all those many selves buried, hidden, afraid, deep down inside us.

I took my son and daughter to the circus some time ago and during that wonderful evening, the time came as it always does, when the clown car drives wildly around the track. Then it stops, and for a second nothing happens - and then the fabulous miracle happens again and the clowns pour out - short ones, tall ones, ones with hats on and no hats, red ones, blue ones, green ones, yellow ones - they just keep coming out, pouring out endlessly from that tiny little car. A miracle has happened again. As the children whooped and hollered, I remembered that scene in the movie, "A Thousand Clowns" (how we loved it) when Murray, who loves Sandra - the Sandra who is all tied up, bottled up and thinks she's nobody and that nobody cares about her - says to her, "There are so many Sandras. You know in the circus that little red car that drives around the track and when it stops, out pour a thousand clowns? There are a thousand Sandras waiting to come out of you!"

We all have that red car potentiality hidden deep within us, and it is always love that unlocks the door. We are called to be mutual liberators to set each other free like this. The depth of the power at work among us is the spirit's reaching down the length of the cross into the depths of our inner being to grasp us and lift us up with power to see and power to be. To all the lonely people of the world, the spirit says, "You belong. You are a member of the family".

ROOTS AND FOUNDATIONS

Paul prays for us, as for the Ephesian congregation, "that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all of God's people what is the breadth and length and height and depth of Christ's love...."

Yes, we belong to the family of Christ, whose love wells up in the heart of our life together - to bless, to heal, to sustain every last and lost child among us. This is a small part of the family of Christ. He has called us here from many places across the face of this earth and from many years - all these faces lined with the years and the tears, shining with his hope, seeking to find ourselves and each other. He has called us to this place - a fellowship, a community without walls, a community with roots, a rootage in God revealed in Christ. ~~He is the source of our lives, our being, our hope, joy, endurance. Our faith is in Him - not Moses, Buddha, Mohammed, or in anything other than in Christ.~~

And in a rootless time when men are adrift and people so much on the move, it is so important to know where your roots are, ~~and to know who you are.~~ We are a community without walls and with roots, and our roots go deep in to Jesus Christ. We are open to the world, but not empty to the world; we are filled to the brim with the love and understanding and acceptance of Christ.

And how do we speak of Christ's love in our family together? It is hard to do without cheapening or obscuring it, but we need to try from time to time, for our own self-understanding. I can only point to it with some suggestion offered by you who are a part of it. Two instances I put before you.

Several Sundays ago a young couple visited our service of worship for the first time, and afterward said to one of our members. "We will come back; there is community here". "Community" Sometimes in our worship and fellowship on a Sunday this "community" is very much alive, teeming with the love of Christ so that you can feel the warmth and power of it, and you know by intuition that sometimes here the sick are healed, the prisoners are set free, the poor have the good news preached to them and there is reconciliation, acceptance, understanding, love that cross over some of those man-made barriers and walls of class and color.

A few days ago, a letter came to me from a young man who use to be quite active here in our church, sang in the choir, and now living in another city, returned to worship with us on Communion Sunday. A line or two from a letter that he sent I share with you: "I cannot tell you how wonderful I felt after the service. All the memories of how that fellowship of people helped me get through those first difficult months when I first came to NYC came to me as I worshipped there.....you can't imagine how I lived from Sunday to Sunday just for that friendship that was extended there."

Some of you may understand his feeling. The family here embraces you so quickly and with such surprise. A little time with near strangers, a little work on a common project with people you scarcely know, and suddenly over weeks or months, you find that you are brothers and sisters in a new family, where there is a new kind of friendship - a friendship which people who would not normally seek each other out find themselves drawn together, where the young and the old begin to appreciate and understand and love each other. It's the kind of friendship where we are given grace

to endure one another, to somehow grow through to a deeper ~~love~~ level of understanding and acceptance; called out of our aimlessness to find joy and power in a great work together which takes us out of our little selves and makes us great in service.

In this family without walls, in this community with roots that run deep in Jesus Christ, there is a place for each person. No one is excluded from the family picture - no, not even one!

LET US PRAY Dear God, Our Father, from whom every family on earth and in heaven is named, help us in our life together in this family to recover that which makes the fellowship of Christ's family the real thing - and then send us out to carry that spirit of love and acceptance, compassion and understanding - in to our homes, our offices, our schools, in to all those areas in which we work and live during the days of the week. Amen