

First Congregational United Church of Christ

Sixth Sunday of Easter- May 14, 2023

Scripture lessons: Genesis 12:1-5a & I Corinthians 1:18-25

FAMILY MESS

In our country, today is Mother's Day. In our United Church of Christ, this day has also traditionally been highlighted as the Festival of the Christian Home. Mothers, fathers, and children joined in families by God's grace through Jesus Christ- that's what we celebrate today.

What is life like in such families? When young children are in them, stories specifically for children are often read. Among these, both in Christian homes and many others, *The Velveteen Rabbit* by Margery Williams has long been favorite. At one point in Williams' story, the Rabbit asks, "What is REAL?"

The Skin Horse answers, "Real isn't how you are made . . . When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you *become* Real."

The Rabbit wonders, "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up . . . or bit by bit?"

The Skin Horse replies, "It doesn't happen all at once . . . You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you're Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

Becoming *real*- isn't that what everyone really wants? Can you think of anyone who *wants* to be fake, phony, or superficial?

Yet if becoming real takes a long time, if it means getting shabby, losing our eyes, and going loose in the joints, is *that* what we want? I think I'd prefer it all to be quick and easy, neat and tidy.

But it's a funny thing. One of God's primary means for helping us to become real is our placement in families. And, given that, how many of us have family life that is reliably quick and easy, neat and tidy? Not many of us, I suppose, especially if we're anything like most families in the Bible.

Take a look at Abraham and his kin. In our first Scripture for today, Abram, who's soon to become Abraham, hears God say, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great . . . and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abram does as God commands. He packs up his wife, Sarah, and his nephew Lot and goes where? To the land that God will show him. And where is that? He doesn't know, so he just goes . . . on faith.

Today Abraham is honored by three of the world's great religions- Jewish, Christian, and Muslim- as one of the most extraordinary men of God. Yet I wonder if as they were packing up,

Sarah and Lot saw him that way. I doubt that their preparation for this trip to only God knew where, was a quick and easy, neat and tidy family affair.

Later, this great man of God, Abraham, blatantly lies to the Pharaoh to save his own skin. "Sarah is my sister," he says, "not my wife." Later, this great man of God, Abraham, sleeps with his wife Sarah's maid, Hagar, and has his first child by her. As you'd expect, this leads to major family tension.

Later, Abraham has a son by Sarah named Isaac, and at God's command Abraham takes him to the top of Mount Moriah where he prepares to slit his son's throat. How do you suppose Isaac and Sarah felt about *that*? Abraham *is* a great man of faith, but he had a load of family troubles.

Later, his grandson, Jacob, steals his older brother Esau's birthright. Jacob and his uncle Laban later deceive and grossly manipulate one another. Jacob's favorite son, Joseph, gets tossed into a pit and sold into slavery by his own brothers.

These are only a few samples of family life in the Bible, all of them taken from only its first book of Genesis. The fact is that family life in the Bible is very seldom quick and easy, neat and tidy. Usually, it's very difficult and *very* messy.

I imagine that most, if not all, of us can identify with living in the middle of some kind of family mess. Maybe rivalry, deception, manipulation, or betrayal among your kin has afflicted you. Maybe you've suffered a terrible family tragedy or loss that's been no one's fault. Some sort of deep family pain or problem seems to be a part of nearly everyone's experience.

But the Bible's family stories like those in Genesis are actually meant to be great news for us. They reveal that no matter how big our messes might be, no matter how many problems we may bring upon ourselves or have inflicted on us in our families, God is still at work. God is still at work with us to accomplish God's purposes, to redeem our troubles, and to use them to help us become REAL in the way that God intends. Abraham and his descendants were and remain in many ways no great shakes, but God still manages to bless the whole world through them.

St. Paul makes a similar point in today's second Scripture reading. He's writing to a Corinthian church that has a mountain of troubles. So much of what he says is devoted to encouraging and instructing them on how to shape up, on how to live much more in the way that God wants. And yet, Paul never once implies that the big mess of the Corinthians' life together somehow places God's work among them in jeopardy. Paul highlights instead that a big mess is exactly what God is accustomed to working through.

He says, "Look at the cross of Jesus. Look at the mess that God took on there!"

Becoming one of us, suffering the very worst that we can do, but still working through it all to bring salvation to everyone. That sounds like sheer foolishness, but it is God's wisdom. God moves past the shiny, "looking good" surfaces that the world tempts us to love and instead enters the dark and murky depths of our lives to face up to our worst. In confronting our worst, God brings about our best.

Yet it's wisdom that we're usually uncomfortable with even in the church. I suspect that's because God's wisdom requires us to enter into and confront the mess of our lives just as fully as God does. God loving us through our messes means that most of our hair gets loved off, our eyes drop out, and our joints go loose. This is a hard truth to face, and maybe especially in the church.

The family that the church is meant to be is one in which we can be real about what our lives are actually like so that we can become more real in the way that God intends. This means that we have to pull off any masks and strip away any put-on smiles that cover up what's truly going on with us. How often, though, is church among the last places where we feel like we can really do that? And how often is the church among the first places where we feel instead that we have to pretend that we have it all together?

"Just as I am, without one plea" - that great, old hymn line expresses the Bible's first word of good news to us. It's that God always lovingly accepts us just as we are, so that with God we never need to pretend. But at the same time, God never wants to leave us "just as we are". God never wants us to stay stuck in any trouble or mess that keeps us down or holds us back from becoming really real in the way that God desires.

Pastor Chris Erdman tells the story of Olivia, a woman in his church who came to deeply understand both sides of this truth. Twenty years earlier she had first become a Christian to the tune of "Just as I Am" sung at a Billy Graham crusade. At that time her enthusiasm for God soared, but soon her life became very *busy*.

She sought and she achieved career, marriage, and children. The way that she pursued these, however, soon made her forgetful of God. Her Christian life became a Christmas and Easter after-thought as she and her family had so much else to do.

In time, her family messes started to pile up. They were the sort that often result from being self-absorbed, materialistic, and superficial. Olivia eventually came back to church and heard, "Just as I Am" again, but this time in a new, deeper, and fuller way. Now she says, "God accepts me just as I am and I'm always grateful for that. But God doesn't want to leave me where I am. I don't want God to leave me where I am."

That's why the *practices* of Christian faith have become essential for her. Disciplined acts of loving service on behalf of others bring her closer to God. Regular acts of worship and prayer slow her down and keep her focused on who and what truly matters. Meditation, self-examination, confession, and spiritual friendship quiet her and help her to keep looking at what's really going on in her life, both the good and the bad. Fasting helps her to deliberately stay away from things that she knows can quickly mess her up- things like too much food and drink, too many possessions and activities, too much media noise and stimulation, too much seeking after the spotlight, too much judging of others that leads her to look down on them.

The *practices* of Christian life that she's discovered are essential for all of us. They're among the means of grace that God gives to enable us to enter *with God* into our messes- especially those of family life.

I remember our daughter, Sophie, as an infant. Nothing before or since can compare to the wonder and joy that my wife, Kathy, and I felt when we first saw and held her. But like any baby in any family, she messed with her parents' lives.

Immediately during those first months, she appeared incapable of understanding a basic fact that was of key importance to her mother and father- namely, that nighttime is for sleeping. Many hours late. late at night were spent rocking her, singing to her, and walking the floor with her. But still, she didn't seem to get it. She messed with her parents' sleep which meant that she messed with her parents' lives.

Which, of course, is a completely common and relatively minor example, but the point of it still holds. Life in our families, messes with us. The basic but often differing needs of each person are always present and have to be taken into account. Work problems, money strains, world troubles, sickness, accidents, old age, death- all of these come along and make things even rougher. Irritations, frustrations, tensions, and conflicts easily mount up and spill over. When a mess of daily difficulties begins to build up, it's *hard* to keep our families together- which is why we need to go *with God* into the mess.

From the cross of Jesus, we've learned that God is already there, ready and waiting for us to join with God in working it through. We do this through the practices of our faith. Worship and service, prayer and meditation, self-examination and confession, fasting and spiritual friendship- all of these, help to keep us close to God. They shape our ears so we can hear God speak; they sharpen our eyes so that we can see God act; they instruct our hands so we can reach out in loving service; and they teach our lips so we can speak the truth in love.

Through it all, we finally become Real. Joined with God, we go way past the shiny, "looking good" surfaces to enter into and confront our own messy depths. Way down there, a lot of our hair usually gets rubbed off, our eyes drop out, and our joints go loose.

But that's only because way down there, God isn't just playing with us. Way down there, God is loving us- really loving us, loving us totally and for *real* so that we finally become Real. And made Real by God's love, the truth is this: we "can't (ever) be ugly, except to those who don't understand." Amen.