

Family Matters – Pentecost+8B

Jesus was born in the city of David because he was of the house and lineage of David. He was heir to the throne of David; the new David himself. So goes our foundational legend. One thing is very clear, as we try to make sense of holy scripture: family matters. Again and again in the Hebrew Bible, we are given genealogies, relationships and the impact of family connections as food for thought and reason for action. Think of Cain and Abel, Leah and Rachel, Little Joe and his brothers, Ruth and Naomi.

Whereas modern-day ethical discussions and the works of popular culture often include disputes over how much favoritism to show family members over neighbors and strangers, the Bible, especially the Old Testament, seems to be concerned with something else. There are plenty stories about near-kin favoritism and revenge on others for family insults, but far more plentiful and powerful are the ethical struggles that take place within families, amongst kinfolk.

Today we also hear a lot about “Community,” and a good thing it is, too. The Episcopal Church and the Anglican Communion struggle to maintain our community cohesiveness

in the face of starkly differing points of view on a small number of volatile social issues – all having to do with gender. As an antidote, we have also been talking about Ubuntu, the Bantu word for the interconnectedness we all must seek if we are to live in peace. Ubuntu was the theme of the last Lambeth conference, and Ubuntu provides the focus for meetings of the faithful everywhere because our intention is the nurture of community. There is a saying the Romans used to sign letters, ‘Si vales, valeo,’ ‘If you are well, then I am well,’ which echoes Ubuntu perfectly. Community has been vital to every successful culture. With our own country under serious threat of splintering, the only antidote is a deeper commitment to justice in community.

Professor Michael Eze writes, “Ubuntu is a demand for a creative intersubjective formation: the ‘other’ becomes a mirror for my subjectivity. Humanity is not bestowed upon my person solely as an individual, but upon the other and me. Humanity is a quality we owe to each other. We create each other and need to participate in our creation: we are because you are, and since you are, definitely I am.” Desmond Tutu offers another definition: “A person with Ubuntu is open and available to and

affirming of others, who does not feel threatened that others are able and good. She or he belongs to a greater whole and is diminished when others are diminished, especially when others are humiliated, tortured or oppressed. Ubuntu speaks particularly about our interconnectedness; you can't be human all by yourself, and when you realize this you will become more generous.”

In the Hebrew Bible, Ubuntu, on the smallest and most intimate scale -- the family -- is of primary importance. When we think about neighbor love, we had best begin with our neighbor across the stableyard, or the fishing boat, across the breakfast table... or across the pillow. Ubuntu begins at home. We might go a step further and say that Ubuntu begins within our own hearts and our own heads, where the forces and voices of instincts and ideals, dreams and duties are often in competition for our attention and energies. Not only are we bidden to love our neighbors as ourselves, as in ‘just like’ ourselves, we are bidden to love our neighbors along with ourselves. ‘As well as’ can mean ‘equally well,’ but it can also mean – does also mean -- ‘in addition to.’ One of the things that makes English so hard for people to learn is the multiple

meanings we have for the same words, so those of us who pretend to speak this language had better pay close attention to what we say if we want to live our lives fully and fairly.

A useful way to think about this might be as a kind of trinity: God, self and neighbor. Jesus said, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind and with all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like unto it: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. Upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Now wait a minute, if everything we’ve got is going into number One, then what is left for number Two? Jesus needed a good editor. Unless... Jesus is saying “Love God completely because that will be the only means for loving yourself and your neighbor. Loving God completely is the foundation of all community.” And if the second is like unto the first, the implication is like unto the Sammy Cahn lyric: “Dad was told by Mother: ‘You can’t have one, you can’t have none, you can’t have one without the other.’” We can’t love God without attention to both ourselves and our neighbors; we can’t love ourselves without God as the means of treating ourselves and each other

well; we can't love our neighbors without the power of God: a deep cistern of charity from which we bathe and quench ourselves as well.

What does all of this have to do with David? Who is David, anyway? All the complicated exploits and ambiguities in David's history are difficult, if not impossible to think of in the context of one single life. He is everyone's daydream of a hero as he defeats Goliath. But David is everyone's nightmare when, on the run from Saul, he works for the Philistines as a mercenary.

He is the glorious king, whose house has been known as God's house for lo these three millennia; but he is also an unglorious, vainglorious sexual predator, whose family relationships are positively astonishing in their dysfunction.

Most importantly, David is our voice. The psalms we have been singing lo these three thousand years, Jew and Greek, East and West, Baptist and Papist, songs about our lives, our fears, our love and hatred for one other, our longing and hope for God, are known as "Songs of David." Because these are David's songs that we sing as ours, we get the idea that David is us.

Triumphant, heroic, duplicitous, weak, creative, passionate, sometimes desperate but also hopeful; David is us. David is us,

and it is our responsibility to look at his story, contemplate his name, and sing his songs to our children, if we would live as members of Christ.

So, when Jesus comes along, of the House and Lineage of David, to be born in the City of David, to inherit the Crown of David, we're not exactly talking hidden meanings. In his humanity, Jesus is as much all of us as David was. That's why Jesus is called "The Son of Man." Yet his life was not full of confusion and violence done to others; he seemed to know his way without all the mistakes we make.

Remember the old song? "I know where I'm going, and I know who's going with me. I know who I love, but the Dear knows who I'll marry?" In Jesus we have someone who knows where he's going. And because the Dear is both with him and in him, he becomes both David and us, but transformed. God has loved Creation enough to have visited us and been us, feeding with grace however many show up and teaching them to feed each other, walking right on the water if that's what it takes to get our attention. The wideness of God's mercy extends neighbor love even to those who kill his earthly body, so that

whosoever takes the proffered hand and identifies with David in believing with hope may indeed falter, may even fail spectacularly; they may even die too young, and too, too hungry because of the failures of others or the violence of nature, but they shall not perish; they shall have everlasting life.

The hand is extended; the means of taking it are at our immediate disposal: Pursue interconnectedness – seek Ubuntu. Say to one another, “Si vales, valeo,” “If you are well, then I am well.” For the Bible tells us so.