

Dunbarton Congregational Church  
Sunday, October 21, 2007  
10:30 a.m.

## Stewardship I Forging a Family of Christ: Brothers and Sisters

Whenever I want to reflect upon Christianity in the Yankee tradition, I always think of my mother. In deference to this year's Stewardship theme: Forging a Family of Christ, I imagine an encounter in which my mom is referred to as someone's "sister in Christ." "Member of my church family?" now that's acceptable, comfortably generic. But "sister" is way too intimate and threatening, undermining the only ties that really matter here in New England, the ones forged with blood and DNA. If I ask, "Who is your brother?" you aren't likely to say Bill or Jim or Bob. If I ask, "Who is your sister?" you're not likely to say Margaret or Linda or Patty. You'd think, *immediate* family, because that is what we do. The point I am trying to make is that Yankees don't mix faith and family, they are not the same and don't even kid about it. Calling someone in church "my sister" or "my brother" is forced and preposterous—those friends sitting in the next pew are not kin and I don't care what the Bible says about it.

The problem is the Bible has a *lot* to say about it. In Mark's gospel, Jesus promises blessings a hundred-fold to those who leave their families of origin to follow him. In Luke he says we must *hate* our natural families in order to properly commit to discipleship. Jesus isn't implying, he's *telling* us that our faith family is more important than our blood families, something that sits very poorly in a culture that isolates church from real life.

When it comes to Acts and the Epistles, it gets even worse, every believer is a pseudo-sibling:

In Acts,

When they had seen and encouraged the brothers and sisters, they departed.

Colossians

To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters

1Thessalonians

Concerning love of the brothers and sisters,

1Titus

Put these instructions before the brothers and sisters

1 Corinthians

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,

2 Corinthians

Finally, brothers and sisters,  
Galatians  
For I want you to know, brothers and sisters,  
Hebrews  
I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,  
James  
Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.  
2 Peter  
Therefore, brothers and sisters,  
Romans  
I want you to know, brothers and sisters,  
1John  
Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters,  
Philippians  
Finally, my brothers and sisters,

The list goes on; in the New Revised Standard Version there are over 100 references to our relationship as “brothers and sisters” in Christ. Why then do we find this language so difficult? Why does Jesus insist upon these deep familial bonds? What happens in our souls when we embrace these words? I’d like to answer these questions with three brief stories:

After three days of urban squalor, Kat and I have left Nairobi, heading north to Meru National Park and Mt. Kenya via the village of Thika. It’s a hot Sunday morning and I’m feeling the absence of church as I always do when I am on vacation. Parched and needing a restroom break, we stop at a small roadside station. Thinking it’s my imagination, I hear the strains of a hymn in the air, a familiar tune. I glance at Kat. She nods, she hears it too! Tentatively, we make our way behind the market to a modest corrugated shed filled with worshippers. Feeling disrespectful in our shorts and t-shirts, we turn to leave. “Karibu maumbu!” a young man shouts from the doorway, “Welcome sisters!” Spying my cross, he grins and ushers us inside. The congregation speaks no English. Kat struggles to translate. When the greetings are exchanged, the pastor asks that we pray. I do not understand a word, yet in the strange world that is Jesus Christ, strangers are transformed into brothers and sisters, children of the same God. Their spirit is always with me.

It is day three of our mission trip to Ghana. One of the young women in our group has become seriously ill. I volunteer to stay behind to care for her for the day. By late morning her fever has spiked. I call for Angelica, one of our hosts; she fetches a nurse from the clinic. Tylenol is dispensed. Then another woman is called. Without speaking, without explanation, we form a circle of four around the bed, lay our hands on Mary’s

shivering body and pray long and hard in Christ's name for her recovery. "Thank you, my sister," Angelica whispers as Mary drifts off to sleep. Later that afternoon, Angelica and I sit in the garden and share our faith stories, and in the strange world that is Jesus Christ, strangers are transformed into sisters, children of the same God. Her spirit is always with me.

It is two weeks ago in Brentwood. I and twenty colleagues have gathered at Pilgrim Congregational Church for a workshop with John Bell, composer of much of the beautiful Iona music we have been singing. Wearing a pink T-shirt and pink socks, he enters the room, a twinkle in his eye, humble in demeanor and huge in spirit. "Good morning brothers and sisters (ses-ters)," he says in his thick Scottish brogue. Immediately, I am rocketed back to the Abbey, that first night, when sixty weary and nervous pilgrims from thirteen countries were instantly united in that greeting, "Welcome brothers and sisters!" Throughout that week on Iona, we worked and laughed and sang and talked, daring to use this relational language, and in the strange world that is Jesus Christ, strangers were transformed into brothers and sisters, children of the same God. My three roommates and fellow travelers will be with me in spirit always.

I use these three stories this morning, not to wow you with my exotic travels, but to lift up the reality of our brotherhood and sisterhood in Christ, not only in our global relationships, not in an esoteric sense, but in our relations with one another, right here in this church, right now. If I call you my brothers, it means that I will be loyal to you; I will stand by you and honor you, defend you and forgive you. If I call you my sisters, it means that I will be present to you; I will listen to you and pray with you, cry with you and walk with you to places no one else will go.

Christian brothers and sisters are not friends—the people in our lives who are *like* brothers and sisters to us, people who share the same interests, tastes or values. Christians are brothers and sisters, children of the same God, baptized into the same faith, fed at the same communion table, enlivened by the same Spirit, committed to the same purpose, and saved by the same Lord. Like true siblings, we are joined by our parentage, often agreeing on nothing except our relationship with Christ. My friends, how could the Christian faith have survived two thousand years of conflict and persecution without these bonds of kinship? How has the Dunbarton Congregational Church survived two *hundred* years of change and challenge without these same essential bonds?

Though here at the Dunbarton Congregational Church, our reserved Yankee nature may not inspire us to shout out "My brother!" or "My sister!" anytime soon, I hope that you will think about it. I hope that you will at least say those words in your head because

I can tell you from experience, something shifts in your soul, something deep and powerful happens when our shared relationship as brothers and sisters is named. Where better than a small church to forge these bonds of spiritual kinship. And so, Paul prays for us, for Christians everywhere and throughout time:

<sup>14</sup> I bow my knees before the Father, <sup>15</sup> from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. <sup>16</sup> I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, <sup>17</sup> and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. <sup>18</sup> I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, <sup>19</sup> and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. <sup>20</sup> Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, <sup>21</sup> to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Let me leave you with a daring assignment for the coming week: each time you write a church email, sign it “Sisters and brothers in Christ.” See if anything shifts: see if your heart is strangely warmed, see if your feelings for this community change, see if your sense of commitment to our mission feels different, or your sense of connection to the church feels different, or your understanding of who Jesus is feels different, or your compassion for the world feels different..

Listen, my beloved brothers and sisters.  
Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,  
For I want you to know, brothers and sisters,  
Do not be astonished, brothers and sisters,  
Finally, my brothers and sisters,

Something may just happen. Amen.