

50th Anniversary Celebration - May 5, 2013

John 13:12-17, 34-35, I Kings 8:22-23, 27-30, 54-61, I John 4:7-12, Psalm 100

On that last night, before Jesus was arrested, he passed on to his disciples some important final words of wisdom. He said to them that they were to love each other as he had loved them, and that people would know that they were his disciples if they showed love for each other.

Today we are gathered here to celebrate the love of people for each other among this group of Jesus' disciples called Our Redeemer Lutheran Church. For 50 years, people have come together around this organization, drawn by their shared faith in Jesus Christ, and for many also drawn by their own family associations with the Lutheran church. But they have not only come together to do the official business of the church, which is to proclaim the Gospel, administer the sacraments, teach the Scriptures, and reach out to those in need. They -- we -- have also come together to do what could be called the core work of the church: to show love for each other. And indeed, based on what Jesus said, when we don't love each other, we are not recognizable as the disciples of Jesus.

Here is the gift of Our Redeemer Lutheran Church as I have experienced it: that people have love for one another.

Four years ago, when I first took up the position of Pastor here at our Redeemer, at the Council Retreat that year, we engaged in an exercise of trying to find some short, pithy expression that would communicate something about the congregation to the outside, to people who might not be familiar with Our Redeemer Lutheran. We brainstormed, and then we began to whittle down the possibilities, until we settled on the phrase we use now: "A Family in God."

Now, I'll admit that at the time I was slightly uncomfortable with the choice, but it had been the democratically chosen option, so I honoured it. I was uncomfortable with it because families are not always happy places for people. Some families are highly dysfunctional, and even dangerous for some of their members. Moreover, the normal ways to get into a family are either to be born into it or marry into it. The implications for congregational ministry could be devastating. If the only way to get in here were to marry in or be born in, we would be in serious trouble.

But then I had to remember that not all families are dysfunctional or dangerous, and that there are actually other ways of being brought into a family.

When I was about fifteen years old, I was spending the summer in Germany with

my grandmother, as I usually did. When I wasn't helping my grandmother with chores or in the fields, I was usually with my friend Jürgen. He was the youngest of six children of a very pious family who were active in both the established church and in the Pietist meeting house in town. I spent a lot of time with Jürgen's family, and they included me a many of their family activities.

That year, one of Jürgen's older sisters, Anne by name, was discerning whether she should just stay a nurse, or become a deaconess. The deaconesses in Germany are -- or were anyway at that time -- sort of like Lutheran nuns. If you became a deaconess, you couldn't marry. One day, while I was hanging out with Jürgen, a family meeting was called to pray together and help Anne discern. I got up and said that I should probably go, but Anne looked at me and said, "You are staying because you are part of this family too."

It was one of the most profound and moving moments of inclusion I have ever experienced. Little old me, from my broken little secular family, declared to be a part of this wonderful family. It was an outpouring of pure love, and that is what I want us to be about too: to open our doors, invite people into our living room (here) and our dining room (the hall), and say, "You are staying, because you are part of this family too." That, to me, is "a family in God."

It is a testimony to the people of Our Redeemer over the years that we have thrived as a congregation, and that the membership has evolved over the years. In other words, the fact that the current membership is not only made up of charter members and their extended families means that the doors are open, and there is a real invitation to come in, not just in words.

You can say, "All are welcome" all you want, but when people come in they can read the true emotions underneath the words. There are many churches that say, "All are welcome." But when many of them say that, what they mean is, "You are welcome as long as you do things our way and fit our ideas of the right kind of people." If you really mean, "All are welcome," you have to be prepared to love people who are different from you.

And that is what happens here. I have seen it with my own eyes, and read it with my heart. Let us continue to love as Jesus loved that all may know that we are his disciples. Amen.

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