

Sibling Rivalry

There is always what is and what is underneath. Both are real, both affect interactions and relationships and both have much to teach. This short story from Scripture is often used to teach a simple, or at least simple sounding understanding of heaven, yet there is much underneath, much which affected those asking the question, the one answering and each and all who heard. There is much underneath which speaks to human nature, to living together and to those gathered this day.

This is a story which takes place within a family, a family of faith. It has been my experience that every family has its disagreements, its personality clashes, its skeletons. That is why the worship preparation thought speaks to me and is a basic understanding of the words I will share. If that is not your experience or understanding, if you believe that there are families that are without – without differences of opinions, without clashes, without skeletons, then please agree to disagree with me on that fact and simply consider what God might bring to your thoughts in this story, or in this day.

Biblical scholarship teaches that the Sadducees, as did Jesus, belonged to the Jewish faith. Their differences being in what we call theology, or understanding of God, not in believe in God. One if those differences dealt with eternal life, or what happened after death, or resurrection. Those following the theology which identified them as Sadducees did not believe in resurrection, in life after death. That adds a different dimension to the question asked on that day, or at least the purpose for the asking. This family interaction (dare I say squabble?) had more to do with family dynamics that with life or death or life after death.

If you would like to undertake an unusual Bible scan the Gospels, the four books regarding the earthly life of Jesus,(Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) pausing to reflect on the interactions within the family, the disciples, the followers, and the larger religious community.

It is my hope that if we take a few moments to consider what may have been going on underneath in our Scripture reading, we might gain insight in to what may go on underneath when the family, be it family or origin, family of faith or family of community, gathers today. It was disagreement which led to the question asked. There was a lost focus on that which made them family, being children of Abraham, children of God. Individual opinions become the identifying factor, rather than family membership. Individual understandings, individual preferences, individual experiences had become dividing lines.

As is known to happen when families gather, diversity of thought, of understanding, of choices or of priorities became challenges. Differences became black or white, right or wrong, shades of grey were unacceptable. Focus became self, defending one's choices or viewpoints, looking

for fault or errors in others. Thoughts became rigid, distinctions unacceptable. Not in an openly hostile way, perhaps not even in a way which the family members were aware of, yet it was underneath and it had, and has, it's affect. It was and is a reality that impacted the family dynamics on the day of our Scripture story and it is a reality which impacts many families today.

The first "lesson" offered may be the importance in looking at what is underneath, what drives questions or attitudes within the family. There is much written by those considered experts in family systems or dynamics today regarding the tendency to slip into roles when gathering with the extended family. Rather than being who we are at this stage in our faith journey, we can revert to our youth, to the insecurities, the misunderstandings and the power struggles of times past. There is a tendency to view others not as they are but as we have remembered them, and read into their intentions our own issues or insecurities. We may see more clearly how God would have us to be family today if we take a moment to ask ourselves what stirs our emotions, our reactions and even our conversations when the family, of origin, or faith and or community gathers.

Another "lesson" may be the impact that gathering may have. Being "home" affect us, sharing that "home" affects us. There was a time when I was taken back when the stories of childhood shared by my sisters differed than mine. We are stair-steps, with just 2 years between each of us. Yet we remember, because we experienced, our shared childhoods in some vastly different ways. To be mindful that such differences are not seen as challenges to our "truth-telling" or naming our personal experiences as right or wrong can be hard when we are gathered, and when others, our children and now grandchildren, are listening to the family stories. When I was about 10 I became ill with a disease that required those living with me to receive shots in order to prevent their contracting the illness. My memory of this time deals with the months I spent bedfast, yet my sisters, who were 12 and 14 at the time, carry of memory of having to undergo an unpleasant, painful, doctor's visit, and a shot to the backside for no reason other than Joy was sick. When talk of "that time" comes up when the family is gathered, all we can do is agree to disagree.

What might we learn, individually and together, is we are mindful of the impact that gathering, gathering as a community, a family of faith, may bring? What shared or similar incidents might have been vastly different in experience and carry a very different story individually? Where is it that we might need to acknowledge that it is best to agree to disagree? How might we be a more loving and forgiving family if we were to see the differences of our experiences and opinion as reminder of the uniqueness of each individual that is God's plan and imprint?

For me, looking at this story, the interactions and at Jesus, the most powerful lesson is the power of focus, the power that is in our sense of purpose. Jesus could have "called them out" –

questioned the intent of their question or even joined in the power struggle, yet he did not. He answered, answered with God's way, as best as he understood. Jesus moved passed the earthly realities, passed the differences and even that which did not have one "right" or easy answer, so that the focus was on God and our position as children of God. He reminded all gathered that they are family, and that being family is a bond that does not chain us into uniformity of thought or experience but is a safety net that allows us to discover who we are through our gathering and our scattering, through our shared memories and our differences.

The holiday season is one which calls families together and can increase the strain and expectation we place upon ourselves, others and the family as a whole. I pray that we will be willing to ask God to enlighten us on the underneath of all our family ties, that the Spirit might speak to us of the impact that gathering and wishing to be family has, and most importantly that we not lose focus, we not forget that which draws and binds us together, that each and all are beloved children of God.