

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Sep 24th 2013

Today's readings invite us to consider some very fundamental questions: "Who is my family?" and "Who has a claim on my time, my talents, my energy, my love and concern?" Jesus challenges his followers, and us, to re-think our assumptions and definitions.

You have probably heard people say "This is the family I was born into but this is the family I chose." Or "We can't choose our family, but we can choose our friends." I have heard people say this in the context of expressing a preference for the latter, maybe even a justification for avoidance of the former. Sometimes there are very good reasons to avoid members of our family of origin –that's not what I'm talking about here. The readings today challenge the notion that I get to pick and choose and decide who has a claim on me; who I consider to be "family".

The reading from Ezra describes the process of rebuilding the temple. King Darius orders the temple to be built on the previous site, and directs his officials to be supportive of this effort, paying them with tax revenue, and to be prompt in their payments. Their obligations and responsibilities of their relationship are clear. The family – "the children of Israel" - gathers to celebrate at its completion.

One mark of their fidelity to God consists in being obedient to rebuilding the temple. They offer sacrificial lambs, rams, bulls and he-goats as members of this family, acknowledging their relationship with God and giving God what is owed. The roles of the priests and Levites in service to God are also defined.

In the Gospel, Jesus is told "your mother and your brothers are standing outside and they wish to see you." He takes this opportunity to re-define his followers' notion of family. "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and act on it." How strange this would have seemed to this tribal people in which family blood ties and nationality were everything! Jesus describes the relationship we have with God as one of listening; we do not demonstrate fidelity through buildings or sacrificial offerings or laws. Acting on the word of God is what binds us to one another and makes us "family." We are family by nature of being created in God's image and likeness, each of us children of God, not defined by blood lines.

As Paul writes in his letter to the Galatians, "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (3:28). Everyone has a claim on us. "Who is my family?"

Everyone.

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