

7A 2023

I was once a member of a clergy group that included Muslims, Jews, Unitarians, and various types of Christians.

Each fall, we would present a series of public discussions.

One year, politicians were trying to get votes by whipping up fear about the imminent destruction of the family, by which they meant the inclusion in families of people formerly not accepted, so “expansion of the family” was a more apt phrase.

Because it was a hot topic, the clergy group chose to discuss the member religion’s perspectives on family.

At the event, visitors would move from table to table and listen to how Jews, Unitarians, etc. view family.

I was busy presenting the Episcopal version, so I could not hear clearly and did not get enough breaks to visit all the tables, but it sounded like everyone was taking the safe route of offering comforting acknowledgement of the importance of family without risking any attempt at defining it.

Knowing Jesus to be less fainthearted than my fellow clergy, I took a different approach.

I quoted today’s passage from Matthew.

“For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law [*that one is not so hard*]; and

one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."

Lest people think that Jesus was just having a bad day, I fleshed it out with the passage in which Jesus, when told that his mother and brothers are outside looking for him, replies, "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'"

People were a little stunned by the Episcopal table, but had a hard time arguing against this Christian definition of family because, well, Christ is the one who issued it.

Twice.

There it was, in black and white.

Family means those who do the will of God.

Those are the ones who truly love us, as opposed to those who see benefit in having a relationship with us.

I had hoped to take the wind out of the politicians' sails not by attacking them directly, but by reframing the entire topic in order to offer something of greater substance.

When we accept other people's definitions, we have already acceded to their argument.

Being able to say, “What you define as destruction I call expansion,” on the other hand, is a way not of winning an argument, which is mostly pointless unless we are presenting a case before the Supreme Court . . . it is not a way of winning an argument, but of making clear one’s own position rather than letting someone else define it for us.

When we are about to exclude someone from family, our question must be, “Is this the will of God, or just a reflection of fear that has been instituted by someone else’s definitions?”

Knowing where we stand, moreover, is an important aspect of knowing ourselves, of being comfortable with who we are.

I once saw a meme that said the motto of those with the INFJ personality type (like myself) is, “I will brainwash you into thinking for yourself.”

Self-awareness is an important step towards loving oneself, which is a prerequisite to loving our neighbors.

We are going to disagree sometimes, but I hope that you know where you stand and are comfortable standing there.

It will be made clear by a calm demeanor.

Otherwise, we undermine our primary goal of loving our neighbors as ourselves.

What goes on in our culture is often far afield of the gospel.

Many people prefer division over reconciliation, power over love.

The fear the politicians were stoking about family, the fear that was causing all my colleagues to bend over backwards to demonstrate how much their religion revered family, was unfounded.

We have to set aside fear in order to follow God.

A young friend of mine pointed out in a text that he finds it “sad how so many people seem to be . . . desperate to be free from the world, to be alone.”¹

He explained that real freedom is the ability “to discover the things that tie [us] to the world.”²

As Joan Chittister explains, freedom is living out of our authentic self as God created us.³

How do we do this?

God has made each one of us with different, specific limitations, and these limitations encourage us to focus on certain aspects of reality.

Our profound awareness of some things comes at the cost of utter blindness to other things.

1 Andrew Zamora, personal text on June 24, 2023.

2 Andrew Zamora, personal text on June 24, 2023.

3 Joan Chittister, *The Gift of Years* (New York: Blue Bridge, 2008), p. 109.

Those whom we call geniuses seem to have extreme limitations in other areas.

Einstein could not spell well and had trouble learning to tie his shoes.

In fact, he may have had dyslexia.

He played the violin beautifully, however, and could think about physics and mathematics with greater clarity than most.

Some people are abstract thinkers who have difficulty with concrete information.

Some people are the opposite, and cannot think well abstractly.

Some people are orderly; others are free-spirited.

If we follow our paths, if we become truly who God made us to be, that is, we return to God more deeply connected than when we came from God.

We cannot relate closely to God or anyone without first being ourselves, and that takes time.

Along the way, of course, there are always plenty of people ready to tell us who we should be.

We are too introverted or too extroverted or too white or too black or not white or black enough or too masculine or feminine or not masculine or feminine enough.

Ignore them all.

They are not speaking from God's perspective.

I remember when I was in elementary school in the 70s.

My teachers who thought of themselves as loving, egalitarian heralds of a new era nevertheless perpetuated division.

When a white child did poorly, that was considered an anomaly and something that must be corrected.

When a black child did well, that was an exception and the resultant praise was off key. These teachers had accepted someone else's definitions, which ran counter to their own intentions.

A couple of decades later, when a white adult did drugs, he needed rehab, but when a black adult did drugs, he was a threat to society and needed to be in jail.

I mentioned this when I served a wealthy parish on the north shore of Long Island.

Afterwards, one of the parishioners, a police officer, approached me with such vehemence that the warden, a lawyer, came over to intervene, but by the grace of God, I managed.

I said to the officer, "You are aware that people in *this* community do drugs."

He responded with an indignant yes.

Then I added, "And yet they are never arrested."

His jaw dropped in sudden recognition and he simply said, "Ohhhh."

He had allowed someone else's definitions to get in the way of his own honorable intentions.

We need to set aside other's definitions and assumptions and fearlessly be ourselves, as God created us.

We then recognize how we are connected with others.

We discover the things that tie us to the world, as my friend said, and where we can serve.

It is into this journey to ourselves and, ultimately, to God that our baptism initiates us.

We are committing ourselves to finding out and being who God has created us to be.

Only then can we experience the fullness of God's love for us and share that love fully with others.

We read in Luke that "Even tax collectors came to be baptized [by John], and they asked him, "Teacher, what should we do?" He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." Soldiers also asked him, "And we, what should we do?" He said to them, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages."

Notice that John does not say, "Stop being a tax collector. Go start a floral shop. Stop being a soldier. Found a charity hospital, instead."

They are to be themselves, with integrity and honesty, so that they learn, grow, and return to God more closely related.

This requires a lot of work on our part.

It takes a lifetime of formation, study, and prayer to shed our society's imposed personae, to let go of other people's definitions, and to become ourselves.