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Sermon

2/19/12

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Every time someone asks me how many siblings I have, my response is always “four, two sisters and two brothers” but it usually follows with a more detailed answer. “But my three older siblings are technically half-siblings, one from my mom’s side and one from my dad’s, and the two oldest (my sisters) are so much older than me that we never really grew up in the same house. Actually, Rebekah, my oldest sister, was given up for adoption by my mom, who was 22 and single at the time, so she has a whole other family that she was raised in. Thankfully, she reunited with our family as a teenager, and when I was just two years old, so I’ve grown up with her as my sister.” I could go on, but I think you get the picture; my immediate family is a little complicated.

Today, one of the persons I’m going to talk about was related to me through my sister Kady, who is my dad’s daughter from his first marriage. Her maternal grandma, Dorothy Bruce, whom my dad lovingly referred to as his “out-law” after the divorce, is one of the most special people I’ve come to know. On December 11 of last year, Grandma Dort passed away in her sleep at the ripe old age of 91. I was lucky to have been able to spend time with her a week before, when my parents and I met in East Lansing to visit her in her retirement home. While it was sad knowing that it was probably going to be the last time we would see her, since she had recently made the decision not to operate on the blood clot discovered in her leg, it was also incredibly moving to witness how at peace she was with dying. She loved spending time with her kids and grandchildren, playing bridge once a week and staying up on current events, but she also felt very fulfilled and ready to die. Kady’s mom, Barb, wrote a very touching obituary that perfectly described Grandma Dort, beginning with, “Hillary Clinton lost one of her biggest fans with the death of Dorothy Arlene (Andrews) Bruce,” and also included the line, “She was known to family and friends as a funny, irreverent, opinionated woman who was a tireless supporter of human rights and an advocate for the “underdog.” But the main reading I want to share with you all today was only posted for close friends and family to see on Facebook.

This post was written by Kate, Kady’s stepsister (she’s the daughter of Kevin, Barb’s second husband, from a previous relationship of his, and she also considered Dort her grandma). A portion of it reads:  
Dorothy demonstrated that family doesn't just consist of the people to whom we were born or those who were born to us, but anyone who enters our sphere, no matter how unconventional the route. It didn't matter if she'd known you from birth or if you became a part of her brood later in life: she wanted to see the best in you (and she also wanted to know: "Are you happy?"). She offered love freely and matter-of-factly, a quality that is strong in her children and grandchildren. I'm in awe of the amount of dignity, grace and peace that she carried with her on her way out. We're lucky to have had her.

This section that focuses on family resonated the most with me, and was what I admired greatly about Grandma Dort. During our last visit with her, she talked about how happy she was that my dad ended up with my mom, because his happiness mattered greatly to her. “I remember when he came to our house to drop Kady off on the first Christmas after he and Barb separated,” she said; “he looked so sad and lonely, and I had to really convince him to come inside and celebrate with us.” Because of Dort’s big heart and warm embracement of all people, I not only felt like another one of her grandchildren, but for the longest time it didn’t even register with me how unique the relationships between my immediate family and Kady’s mom’s family were.

When Kady was still college, she would take me, Keaton, and her half-sister Paris (who coined us “quarter sisters”) Grandma Dort and Grandpa Bob’s cabin up north, where we would spend fun-filled long weekends without any parents. It was there that I was first served strawberry shortcake for dinner, chewed with my mouth closed, water skied, and learned how sex *really* worked (thanks to Paris and the middle school aged neighbors). And when my mom’s sister and her family still lived in East Lansing, we would celebrate Thanksgiving at their house in the afternoon, and then Kady would bring me over to the house of Barb and Kevin (who have never seemed like anything less than an aunt and uncle to me) for a second meal, followed by movie-watching and make-overs with Paris. I believe that the harmony within our families is doubtless attributed to Dort’s free offering of love towards everyone, especially those who greatly needed loving, regardless of whether or not they were legally or biologically related to her.

This unrequited love reminds me of today’s saint, Anna Julia Cooper. One obvious reason for this is that at age 55, Anna adopted her late nephew’s five children, a huge and generous undertaking to make later on in life. Yet her heart extended beyond her personal relationships to include advocating for racial and gender equality for all fellow African Americans, especially females. She was highly educated, and believed fiercely in the importance of education for all African American women. During a speech she gave at the World’s Congress of Representative Women in Chicago in 1893, she urged her largely white audience to embrace the notion of solidarity with their African American sisters, and to work together so that opportunities being discussed, for instance the potential right to vote, would be open to all. Both Grandma Dort and Anna cared strongly about social justice issues and in general, about embracing those who seek to do good, but are less fortunate for whatever reason, as family.

In today’s gospel reading, Jesus talks about what family means to him. His definition, too, extends beyond his biological relatives; “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” My understanding of God’s will for us human beings is that we focus our efforts on making the world a better, more peaceful place by being loving people. We don’t have to, and in fact I believe we shouldn’t, abide by the U.S. Census Bureau’s definition of family as being “a unit made up of two or more people living together who are related by blood, marriage, or adoption.” In my sociology class on “Marriage and the Family,” we discussed how this restrictive definition excludes homosexual couples and their children, for example, and thus portrays them as a sort of negative “other” that doesn’t belong. What if the term were expanded to include any persons who share close emotional ties and functions, or who see their identity as importantly attached to a group? Are communities such as this one here, or a close group of college housemates who depend on and support each other not examples of the kind of family that Jesus was talking about?

In closing, I encourage you to join with me in a quest to not limit the conception of family to those mainstream society may tell us is such, but to love freely and unconditionally all peoples, and to invite into whatever you may consider your family those that are in need of one. I also hope that we may not feel ashamed if who or what we consider to be our families do not fit the traditional definition, for as Mrs. Doubtfire says, “if there is love, dear, those are the ties that bind.”