

December 18th, 2022

Luke 1:39-58 “We Are Not Alone”

A few weeks ago, a person in my yoga class asked me if I would be the officiant for her father-in-law’s memorial service. Our yoga group is like a little family and we look out for one another so of course I said, “yes.” When I went to her house to plan out the service, I met her husband for the first time. And as weird as it sounds, he and I had this immediate connection that I don’t think either one of us could figure out at the time. I thought it was funny because in yoga, we always close our sessions by saying, “I recognize the light in you which is the same as the light in me.” It’s sort of like how we in the Christian tradition are called to recognize that everyone is created in the image of God regardless of our flaws or differences. Every now and then, though, you run into someone who within minutes you know there’s something that you both have in common ... a kinship that will soon be revealed.

With my friend’s husband, there were some obvious things that we had in common. We are both bald, goofy graduate school educated Gen X guys. We’re both married to women who a lot of people would say, “How in the world did *you* get hooked up with someone as gorgeous as *her*?!” We both have the same taste in

clothes. We both like Marvel comics and movies and science fiction literature. But as we started planning the service, we finally figured out what that unspoken connection was. We were both raised as only children. *That's* what it was!

Once we figured that out, we had a few laughs about some of the issues that only children face in life. Hey, do some people treat you like you're an alien or like you have some contagious disease because you're an only child? Yeah, me too. Do people actually pity you and say things like, "Oh, I'm so sorry you're an only child?" Yeah, me too! Do people have stereotypes of you and make assumptions like, "Oh, he's probably selfish and spoiled because he didn't have any siblings." Yeah, that definitely happens. Have you ever had someone you were romantically interested in drop you like a hot potato when they found out you were an only child? Yes! What's up with that, right? Like it's our fault that we're only children!

Now, did I ever wish I had siblings growing up? Yeah, the thought crossed my mind a time or two. It might have been fun to have a big brother to show me the ropes and give me some advice about how to get through life's challenges. Yeah, it might have been fun to have a little sister to watch out for and protect. But I also appreciated the autonomy that I had. My friends with siblings didn't

seem to have much of that. That older brother who is supposed to show you how to get through your freshman year of high school can also be the one who picks on you and makes your freshman year a nightmare. That little sister who you're supposed to look out for could be the one who tattles on you and blames for you for things you didn't do! So in that respect, I didn't mind being an only child because I didn't have siblings who were up in my business all the time. I don't know quite how to explain it. But I imagine some of you other only kids out there understand. That is, those of you who are willing to admit that you're an only child. Because, well ... you know how some people treat you when they find out! Know that you are loved and welcomed here.

The other issue I had growing up was different though. I didn't grow up with any family other than my own immediate family. I didn't have aunts or uncles or cousins that I was in regular contact with. I never met any of my grandparents in person. Most of them died before I was born, and the one who was still alive lived in Florida until he died when I was nine. I think the closest relative I had growing up was a cousin who lived in Susanville for awhile, but that was a long way from mid-Willamette Valley Oregon. Mary, on the other hand, came from a very large family with almost all her siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents living within a day's drive of each other. She could never understand

how I managed to get through life without this experience of having family that lived so close. On the other hand, I could never understand how she survived family get-togethers when there was always some feud going on or some drama that I couldn't even get my head wrapped around. I'd think, "Why can't you all just get along? Why do you almost come to blows over how to interpret the rules of a *board game*? Why do you all bring up horrible embarrassing things that happened during your childhoods and treat them like they happened yesterday? How do you survive these big family gatherings? How do you navigate the whole, 'She's not talking to cousin so-and-so,' and all the family gossip and drama?" She said, "Well, it builds character! That's just the way things are when you come from a big family." Maybe that's where I missed out. I just never understood the weird dynamics that occur in big, tight-knit families.

Our scripture lesson today is about family - specifically two cousins – Mary and Elizabeth. Elizabeth was from the line of Aaron, the priestly class of the Jewish faith and culture. Mary was a lower-class country girl with no special lineage (at least according to Luke's gospel). Elizabeth was described as righteous. Mary was not (at least according to Luke's gospel). Elizabeth was from Jerusalem, the capital city of Israel and home to the temple that was at the center of Jewish faith and practice. Mary was from Nazareth, the land of those who farmed

wheat, olive oil and grapes. Elizabeth was married to a priest. Mary was engaged to a carpenter. Elizabeth was considered too old to have a child. Mary was considered too young. Elizabeth's pregnancy raised her social status. Mary's pregnancy lowered her social status and could even lead her to be socially marginalized or exiled. Both were informed by God through the angel Gabriel that their children would play an important part in God's redemption of the world. Elizabeth was to be the mother of John, the one who would be known as "the baptizer" - the one who would serve as the voice crying out in the wilderness to prepare the way for the messiah. Mary was to be the mother of that messiah and would bear the responsibility of raising him. Mary greeted Elizabeth at a literal threshold – the doorway to Elizabeth's home – and a threshold moment in her life when all was about to change.

These two came together to support each other. The gospel writer mentioned that Mary would stay with Elizabeth for *three months*. But that's the way families were during that time and place in history. There was no social safety net in place. Your family was your safety net. Mary needed a safe place where she could avoid some of the social stigma that came along with being pregnant before one was married. Sure, families can be frustrating sometimes. Families can fuss and fight and feud and be awkward at holiday gatherings, but they can

also come together in a pinch especially when one of its members is in need. And so it is also in the family of God. We can fuss, and feud and be awkward too, but we come together when it counts. One of the lessons from this morning's scripture is, "We need one another." As Mary stated in our call to confession this morning, "we need one another to grow, we need one another to love, and we need one another to see God more clearly."

In order to learn the other important lesson from our scripture this morning, we've got to talk about the Magnificat. Excuse me pastor, did you say, "magnificent cat?" No. Most cats *think* they're magnificent, but that's not what we're talking about here. "Magnificat" is the label that has been bestowed upon Mary's response to Elizabeth's greeting. "Magnificat" comes from the first word of this canticle in Latin which means, "My soul magnifies." What does it magnify? "My soul magnifies *the Lord*." Folks who went through our Bible study on the books of Samuel and Kings last year may be thinking, "That sounds kind of familiar. Didn't that whole study start out with a woman singing a song that started out with 'My soul magnifies the Lord?'" Yes it did. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the prophet who would lay the foundations for the Kingdom of Israel, sang, "My heart exults the Lord." Both of these songs – Hannah's and Mary's - are about God establishing a kingdom of justice and peace. But whereas Hannah's song is all about what

God *will do*, Mary's song is about what God has *already* done and will *continue* to do. And both songs affirm the other important lesson in this passage which is, "We are not alone."

Mary was not alone when she, in her time of vulnerability, went to her cousin's house and was greeted with kindness and hospitality. Joseph was not alone when he was faced with the shocking news that the child she carried was from the holy spirit. Their family was not alone when it came time for Mary to bear the child but could not find lodging. God is always there, but God also works through the communities of faith so that we can experience that kinship that we all share as children of God.

This past week has been difficult for our faith community ... for our church family. Three people who we were in fellowship with over the years have died. Bill Bergman, a member of our church, pastor of the First Christian Church in Corning, and one of the most dedicated and convincing Santas I've ever met died Monday. At 1:30 on Thursday morning Joyce Carrier, a beloved and enthusiastic member of our church died in her home while on hospice, then at 6:30 in the evening of the same day, Ron Brillhart, husband of our beloved Judy Brillhart died. Add to that, the finance office computer crashed Thursday on the day Nancy was trying to do payroll, the heat in the

Bethany room stopped working, and the locks on the front doors of K-Hall broke just in time for the Chico Ballet's annual Christmas Program here at the church. There were some other things that happened this past week, but Mary will cover those during prayers of the people. The bottom line is that this past week was challenging for our church. But God was there through it all, and God is here in this place at this moment and God will continue to be with us in the days, weeks, months, and years to come. We here at First Christian Church are part of the family of God in the same way that we, as a community here in Chico California are a part of the family of God; and in the same way that we as a global community of God's creation are part of the family of God. How do we know this? Why is this so? Because the Spirit of God that is within me recognizes the Spirit of God that is within you. You are not alone. *We* are not alone. May God bless this family, and may we be bound together in faith as we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child.