

In the Shelter of Each Other
Presented by Margie King Saphier on November 23, 2003
at United First Parish Church, Quincy, MA

Traditionally at Thanksgiving is a time families gather together to give thanks and to often watch the football game. Recently there has been much discussion about marriage and who gets to marry and what a family should look like. This past week Chief Justice Margaret H. Marshall wrote for the Massachusetts State Supreme Court stating “that the institution of marriage as stated to be voluntary union between a man and a woman needed to be updated ‘to the voluntary union of two persons as spouses.’” The Court based their decision on the Massachusetts Constitution because “it affirms the dignity and equality of all individuals. It forbids the creation of second class citizens.” Who gets to marry is very much a religious issue.

In her book, The Shelter of Each Other, Mary Pipher tells a true story to dramatically convey the purpose of family. "On the front page of her morning newspaper was the headline RANGERS RESCUE LINCOLN COUPLE. The article began: 'While their three children watched from the bank, the parents were rescued from the lip of a 75 foot waterfall in the Roaring River in Rocky Mountain National Park. They suffered hypothermia from spending forty minutes in the cold rushing waters of the river, but were in stable condition at a Denver hospital.'

The family had been hiking beside the waterfall when the mother slipped into the river above the falls, and to keep herself from going over, she wedged herself between boulders. As their children watched from the river bank, the father and other visitors tried to form a human chain to reach her, but the swift waters made that impossible. Others attempted to reach her with a rope made of belts and clothing, but that chain also broke. Then the father went into the water with a thin nylon cord around his waist, but that broke as well, leaving the couple stranded midstream at the top of the falls.

The reporter wrote: 'The husband cradled his wife in his arms and bore the brunt of the pounding water.' After the couple had been in the water for forty minutes, the husband could barely hold on to the boulders, but the wife talked calmly to him and helped him stay conscious. At last, a ranger in a wet suit, roped to rangers on the shore, moved into the water and slid toward the couple. Another ranger got in the water below the waterfall, ready to catch them if they went over.

The exhausted couple made a plunge for the ranger who was able to hang on to them long enough for the other rangers to pull them to shore. They were given warm fluids to counter the effects of hypothermia. Two helicopters then flew the couple to a hospital in Denver."

Hopefully, none of us will have such a memorable vacation. Although the story is full of excitement with a happy ending, it is also an example of what family members do for one another. The husband waded into the water to save his wife's life. His wife also did what family members do - she talked her husband into holding on when hope was fading and he was ready to give in to the pounding current. Acts of love and courage are the best things about families.

Although the story about the family at Roaring River is about a mom and dad and three kids, it could have just as easily been about a mom and her children, or a dad and his children. It could have been about two moms or two dads and their children. The story isn't about what the family looked like, but about the love and sacrifice the people within the family are willing to make for one another.

In our present day society, some families often feel that the environment that surrounds them is as cold and perilous as Roaring River. To survive, grow and flourish, family members stick together, take risks and make sacrifices for each other. Spouses not only cradle and protect each other, but they also cradle and protect their children.

One thing is certain, the family at Roaring River would not have survived that near tragedy without the help of the forest rangers and the community of hikers and campers. Just like them, we, as individual families, need support from community. I think we need a companion motto to "It takes a village to raise a child." It is, "It takes a community to support a family."

Not all families are supported by the community, or by their state government, or federal government. These are families in which the loving adults are of the same sex. Just last month, President Bush signed a proclamation declaring October 12 to 18 to be Marriage Protection Week, but the marriage that was being protected was strictly between a man and woman. This proclamation does not affirm the inherent dignity of the individual, not only of gays and lesbians, but also of all of us. Our government's exclusion of our gay and lesbian brothers and sisters from civil marriage degrades them and their families and denies them the basic human right to legally marry. But worse of all, this denial

has profound impact on one's spirituality. Fortunately the Massachusetts State Supreme Court has sanctioned same sex civil marriage. But there are groups already forming to reverse this decision.

Why is same sex marriage a religious issue? Rebecca Parker, President of Starr King School of Theology, explains that sexual intimacy can be a means of grace, a resource for healing and transformation in our lives. Sexual intimacy serves at least three functions that connect it with spirituality and grace. First, it give us a profound sense of our communion with all of life. Second, it also heightens our sense of personal presence and power. The relational power that is present during intimate moments is profound. Third there is a strong connection between sexuality and its inherent energy that has to do with bonding and communion, with integrity and selfhood, with creativity and life-giving power. Sexuality is our way of being in the world as female or male persons. It is a gift of intimacy that includes not only intimacy with other humans, but also intimacy with God or those moments when one feels at one with the world.

Family need not be traditional or biological. Family can be a group of people who pool resources and help each other over the long haul. Families love one another even when that requires sacrifice. Family means that if you disagree, you will stay together. Families are about commitment and inclusiveness so that we can become all that we can be.

The Sioux Indians understand that it takes a community to raise a family. They have a word, *tiospaye*, which means people with whom one lives. The *tiospaye* provides children with multiple parents, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. If a child or parent is having difficulty, they have other adults to turn to. Families and *Tiospaye* offer a place to which all members can belong regardless of merit. Everyone is included regardless of health, likeability or prestige.

In many ways our congregation is like a *tiospaye* when we, as a congregation, pledge to the children and their parents during a dedication service "our wholehearted and continuing affection, concern, and support," we are "committing ourselves to creating a family of faith in which children may grow into rich and full lives." Like the story *Amazing Grace* and the song *Everything Possible*, we want our children, as well as we adults, to know:

You can be anybody you want to be
 You can love whom ever you will
 You can travel any country where your heart leads
 And know we will love you still
 You can live by yourself, you can gather friends around
 You can choose one special one
 And the only measure of your words and deeds
 Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.

One way to express our love is to give thanks. We will now have our Thanksgiving Communion. I invite you to join me in the Thanksgiving Responsive Litany that is on the insert in the Order of Service.

Let us give thanks for all those things which unite us with each other and with the eternal order of the universe; for those bonds of loyalty and affection which unite us with our family and our friends.

For the love and the support which we have from those nearest and dearest to us, we lift up our hearts in thanks.

For the fellowship which comes from our shared faith and ideals;

For the togetherness we share in our free faith, we give thanks.

For the wider fellowship which springs from our common humanity, a fellowship which transcends all boundaries of race and culture and creed, uniting all humankind in a community far outreaching the things which divide us from each other.

For our common humanity we give thanks, and pray that may we ever live our lives in the even deepening faith that we are all brothers and sisters.

For the elemental forces which move through all the world of nature, from which we have our being, and:

For these and for everything in which our spirits find strength, we lift our hearts in praise and deep thanksgiving.

BREAKING OF THE BREAD

The ingredients of bread include: corn, wheat, rice, oats – symbolizing the staff and strength of life; water – representing freshness and purity; yeast – raising of the spirit; sugar – providing for the growth of the yeast; salt – setting limits of growth for the yeast; and eggs – enriching and enlivening the texture of the bread.

All these ingredients are mixed, kneaded, raised, punched down for a finer quality, baked and cooled. Our common table is now laden with the bread of our many heritages, our many strains brought together. But bread, like life, must be broken to be whole, to fulfill a purpose, to embrace and nourish the bittersweet of life.

UNISON BLESSING

We bless these loaves,
we bless this bread we have in common with one
another and with people all over the earth.
We bless the events, people and places and
circumstances of our lives that feed us,
sustain us and nourish us.

INVITATION

From time immemorial, the sign of friendship and welcome of strangers has been the breaking of bread and the shared cup. We offer you bread and cider from our common table. Eat, drink and enjoy our gathered company.

SERVING OF BREAD AND CIDER

HYMN: 349 We Gather Together

BENEDICTION:

Blessings for a good Thanksgiving go with you. Remember all those gifts that come to you out of the wellsprings of existence. Know yourselves blessed by the most high and the most deep, the known and unknown source of life.