

May 13, 2018
John 17:6-19

Easter 7
Vicar Jason Ashby

“Who Is My Mother”

Happy Mother’s Day to all of you.

Jesus once asked the question, “Who is my mother?”⁴⁹

And of course, Jesus knew who his mother was, for the gospels tell us that the blessed Mary raised him.

And she raised him in the faith of her ancestors, she made pilgrimages with him to the temple, she challenged him, she reprimanded him, she encouraged him, celebrated life’s joys with him, and she even stood boldly at the foot of his cross on Calvary as he died that day for you and me.

And we know this relationship was not one sided. The gospel even tells us that his last worldly concern as he lay dying upon the cross was for his mother’s wellbeing, instructing his disciple John, the beloved disciple to care for her from that time forward.

And so, as he poses the question “Who is my mother?”, Jesus also quickly points to his disciples saying, “Here are my mother and my brothers!”⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”
(Matthew 12:48-50).

For God is the Father of all of us. And in him, through his Son, we are united with one another.

And so, the wisdom that Jesus offers here, is that the ties which binds us together as Christians, as a community of disciples are more deeply rooted in our shared inheritance as children of God, than in our flesh and blood relation to one another.

The gift of family is of course important. It is a gift from God, and a gift we are commanded to respect.

But in Christ we have each been given a much larger family, a much larger community of people who are interested in us, who care for us, and are called to nurture our development as human beings and as children of God.

And at the same time, we have each been given a much larger family for whom we have been given the responsibility of caring for.

This is a gift of our baptism, and a sign of Christ’s spirit within us, that we have been given this new life in him, and that we love one another as Jesus loved us.

About a year ago a brother of ours in Christ shared a story with me that I want to share it with you this morning because I think it is an important part of our shared history as the Lutheran Church, but it's also an important witness of the power of the gospel to restore and renew God's people through his Church.

Now the events that I'm referring to began in 1941, following the German invasion of Russia.

And at that time, the Soviet Dictator Joseph Stalin had ordered the immediate deportation of two million Volga Germans from the German colonies in Ukraine and along the Volga River.

These Germans, who were predominantly Lutheran, were descended from settlers who had been invited to Russia in the 18th century by Catherine the Great to help settle and develop the central steppes of Russia.

But in 1941 every person from these communities between the ages of 16 and 60, were loaded onto cattle cars and sent to the slave labour camps of Russia known as the GULAG.

Now the children and those young people who were less than 16 years of age were scattered off into the wilderness of Russia, but were quickly taken into the care of those men and women from their communities, and their churches who were older than 60 years.

Sometimes it would have been their grandmothers and grandfathers who took them in, but in many cases it was also the elderly bachelors and spinsters, the widows and widowers, local business owners, and retired teachers and nurses, and sometimes even strangers who took them in.

Now it is well known that the majority of those who were sent off to the GULAG slave camps were never heard from again, but in the early 1950's something miraculous began to happen.

Little more than a decade after the original deportation, the Lutheran World Federation began to receive unexpected communication from a number of isolated and underground Lutheran congregations in Russia.

The communications were coming from locations across the Urals and as far east in Russia as the Pacific Ocean.

It began to appear that by the grace of God some of those courageous seniors and the children they had taken into their care had perhaps survived.

And now as the children were beginning to grow older, and beginning to have children of their own, these little communities of exiled and persecuted Christians were also beginning to grow and thrive once again in new lands.

But all of this remained largely unconfirmed until eventually in the late 1950's, representatives of the Lutheran World Federation were finally granted permission from the Soviet government to visit these previously unknown congregations and to confirm what they had hoped might be true.

And so, the first meeting that was arranged, was with two brothers who they had been informed were leading two of the largest congregations within these communities.

One was a truck driver and the other was a baker, but they were both serving as the pastors of these congregations.

And so, when the representatives from the Lutheran World Federation finally sat down with them, they asked them where they had received their university and theological training to hold their office as pastors.

When the brothers realized what was being asked of them they stared silently at one another until the eldest eventually replied with a grin, "We are graduates of Oma University".

Oma? The representative enquired. Yes, they replied. Oma and Opa too.

For it was their Omas and Opas, their grandmothers and grandfathers, sometime by birth but often from that larger community of Christ who had filled the gap of those lost generations, and out of necessity and love for one another they had nurtured these children as their own.

For they were the children of their own children, and their children's children, and their neighbour's children.

And so, the brothers explained that despite their community's grief over those lost, the perils that they faced, and their uncertainty about the future, the elders had decided that it was their responsibility to keep the faith.

They taught the children Luther's Small Catechism, and how to read the bible, and to sing, and to pray, and they passed along the faith of Jesus the exile, Jesus the persecuted, Jesus the Son of God.

And they did it at the dinner table, and at the bedside, and in the little houses where the Church would gather each Sunday to worship their Lord their God.

And it was this love and commitment of their larger family in Christ, that not only allowed them to survive, but gave birth to a new generation of the faithful, and new expression of the Lutheran Church which continues to thrive in Russia to this very day.

Who are our mothers? Who are our brothers and sisters? Jesus looked to his disciples and said here are my brothers, my sisters, and my mothers.

In our gospel reading this morning we hear Jesus praying to God the Father on our behalf, as the mother hen who gathers her chicks together in the name of the one who placed them into her loving care saying,

“they were yours, and you gave them to me... and I have made your name known to them, to the ones who you have given to me from the world”.

This is the example we have in Christ Jesus. To love and to pray for all those whom the Lord has given us, and to make his name known to all who are in our care.

Thanks be to God. Amen.