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## “Lavish”

A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

Third Sunday of Easter (Year B)

April 19, 2015

Acts 3:12–19; Ps. 4; 1 John 3:1–7; Luke 24:36b–48

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What if we all had the same last name, you and I?

That’s the kind of question a child would ask, isn’t it?

That’s the kind of question my middle brother was famous for asking:  
the crazy “what if” question.

What if we all had the same last name, would that make us all family?

This is exactly what the writer of the First Epistle of John suggests

to the early Christian church as they anticipate the pending return of Jesus.

“See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called *children of God*,  
and that is what we are,” the writer proclaims.

It’s a line we claim and use at every baptism when we introduce the  
newly baptized person to the congregation.

It’s a line that we will use this morning in the baptism of little Natalie Ann Hansel,  
proclaiming her new identity in Christ by declaring her new surname:

Natalie Ann Hansel, Child of God.

It’s her new last name. It’s the same as my last name. It’s the same as many of your  
last names: Child of God.

In baptism, we become members of a larger family, of God’s family, made up  
of people from all lands, all races, all cultures, all ethnicities, all ideologies.

"All nations that on earth do dwell" become part of our God-family in baptism.

In human families we are defined by blood relationships.

In God's family we transcend those blood relationships and acknowledge  
a wider kinship that now includes those with different DNA profiles,  
different blood types, those outside our family tree,  
those unfamiliar to us, even those uncomfortable for us to include as family,  
even those completely strange to us.

In baptism, we are being asked to cast a wider net, to hoist a bigger tent,  
to open an engulfing umbrella and to consider all of those underneath  
as members of one God-family.

It's about more than the baby in here, more than another church member:  
it's about those as numerous as the stars in the sky  
and as the sand on the seashore, those outside of this place,  
those sheep from another fold who are swept up  
in the gathering, lavish, loving embrace of God in Christ.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu uses the African term *ubuntu* to describe the  
network of our interdependence with our fellow human beings.

*Ubuntu*, he says, "speaks to the fact that my humanity is caught up  
and inextricably bound to yours. I am human because I belong.

It speaks about wholeness; it speaks about compassion.

A person with *ubuntu* is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share.

Such people are open and available to others,

willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened  
that others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance  
that comes from knowing that they belong to a greater whole.

They know that they are diminished when others are humiliated,

diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated  
as if they are less than who they are.

The quality of *ubuntu* gives people resilience, enabling them to survive and emerge still human despite all efforts to dehumanize them.”

(Desmond Tuto. *God Has A Dream*, p. 25-26)

We are all children of God. We are all children of the same God-Parent. We are all beneficiaries of God, the Father’s great love, which has been given to us.

The Greek uses the verb *didomi*, which usually means “to give,”

but in this context of 1 John, it suggests a gift that is unearned.

The NIV translates it as “has lavished,” as in “how great is the love the Father

*has lavished* upon us, that we should be called children of God.” (1 John 3:1)

Lavish—I like that translation. It suggests extravagance. It suggests an abundance.

It suggests gushing, streaming, heaping, pouring, overflowing, overwhelming love.

We may sprinkle in our rite of initiation, but God lavishes love upon us.

Lavash sounds a lot like lavish, doesn’t it, but lavash is a noun.

It is a thin, crisp unleavened flatbread with a rough surface

and air bubbles that originated in Armenia in western Asia.

I have made some, and it’s here on the table for you to taste after worship.

Lavash is the native bread of one of the earliest Christian communities,

declaring themselves to be a Christian nation in 301 CE.

Once a thriving community of faith, the Armenians were systemically eliminated

by Ottoman authorities in a massacre that began on April 24, 1915

and continued until 1923.

An estimated 1.5 million Armenian children of God were killed,

and a million more were expelled in brutal and oppressive death marches

from their ancient homeland in what is now Turkey.

A Presbyterian minister colleague of mine, Christine Chakoian,

has family stories of her Armenian grandmother’s relatives being yanked from

their homes, forced to line up, kneel and then shot point blank.

Last summer at the 221<sup>st</sup> meeting of the General Assembly of the PC(USA)

in Detroit, we voted to recognize the Armenian “Genocide” centennial on April 24<sup>th</sup>

of this year, the anniversary of the day on which 250 Armenian community leaders and intellectuals in Constantinople were rounded up and imprisoned or murdered, thus beginning the purge that the Chakoian family remembers.

If we practice *ubuntu*, our inter-connectedness, then we lament and we are diminished when any members of our God-family are humiliated, dehumanized, or oppressed:  
our wider net starts to fray, our tent comes untethered, our umbrella leaks;  
when any one member of our God-family suffers, we suffer with them.

I am reminded of a brief scene from the 1985 coming-of-age movie, *The Breakfast Club*, where a random group of teenage misbehaves and spends a Saturday in detention hall together.

Allison, the character played by Ally Sheedy, has the best line in the movie when she says so poignantly, "When you grow up, your heart dies."  
"Who cares?" is the rebuff she gets from Bender.

"I care!" she says.

To be set apart as *children of God* means that our hearts must never die.

We mustn't let that happen! We must remain as tender-hearted as children towards any of our wider God-family members,  
and I'm speaking beyond Christianity here!

Last week, Kathy Parkins, Cherrie Henry, Sarah Finbow and I attended a workshop on Faith Connections and Mental Health in Chapel Hill.

And during the keynote address, the speaker, Amy Simpson, started to cough.

Maybe it was the pollen in the air, or the climate of the room,  
or the length of her speech, but at one point, she started to cough,  
and couldn't get past it.

And Cherrie Henry got up from the back of the room where we sat,  
and she started winding her way through tables, 400 people's worth of tables,  
to the stage at the front of the room.

I thought to myself, "What the heck is she doing? Is she going to go up on

the stage and interrupt the speaker?"

But Cherrie walked to the base of the podium, and handed the speaker a cough drop!

"I always keep them on hand for those dry coughs," Cherrie said later.

That was a move that a child might make: a child who is unaware of what others might think but who is guided solely by a tender-hearted empathy for the other, regardless of the stature of the person or the circumstance.

That is what the writer of 1 John is intimating with the image of the child that he uses in his exhortation to the early church.

"Care!" he is saying. "Care like a child would care. Care as if that other person were a child of God, too. Pursue a goodness that is like Jesus and a purity that is based upon doing right, regardless of the circumstance."

This week, our nation also marks Holocaust Remembrance Week, recalling the 6.5 million Jews and other vulnerable victims who were scarred, branded, persecuted, ghettoized, terrorized, dehumanized, *arbeit-macht-frei*-worked to-death, gassed and killed during World War II.

This happened at the height of human civilization in northern Europe, as millions of other people of faith averted their eyes to the horror that was unfolding before them.

One would think that in 1945 as the concentration camps were liberated by the allied troops, that this kind of unthinkable thing would never happen again, that people of faith *who care, who have grown up and tried not to let their hearts die,* would not let history so repeat.

But it has, and the perpetrators are very often other people of faith, other children of God who have lost sight of the goodness that the Psalmist proclaims, other children of God who have not opened their minds to the understanding of Scripture that the risen Lord lavishes upon us.

One would think that in the aftermath of 1945, this would never happen again,  
that the world would not permit such atrocities to occur,  
but think about Bosnia, think about Rwanda, think about Darfur,  
think about mass graves recently uncovered in Iraq,  
think about the massacre of 144 university students in Garissa, Kenya.

"O that we might see some good!" the Psalmist cries.

"Let the light of your face shine on us, O Lord" (Psalm 4:6).

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, before his execution on April 9, 1945, said,

"The ultimate test of a moral society  
is the kind of world that it leaves to its children."

As we come to the font this morning to baptize little Natalie, a child of God,  
let us imagine these baptismal waters as wider than this little pooling.

Let us consider the waters of Ellerbe Creek, the waters of Kerr Lake,  
the waters of the Neuse River, the waters of the Pamlico Sound,  
the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans,  
the waters of the Mediterranean Sea,  
the waters of the Tigris, Euphrates and Nile,  
the waters of the Jordan River.

And let us open our hearts to children of God everywhere who are touched by  
these waters; let us cast a wider net, let us hoist bigger tent,  
let us open an engulfing umbrella to let the world know, that we care,  
that the baptism of one baby is about all children of God  
because the lavish love of God is that great.

I close with a prayer from the Armenian Orthodox Church:

*O Mystery Deep, unsearchable, eternal,  
and powerfully present with us this day;  
who has established the heavenly dominions with splendor,  
the legions of flaming spirits in the chamber of light unapproachable.*

*With wonderful power you did create humankind  
and clothed us with grace and elegance.  
Through the sufferings of your Only-begotten  
All creatures are renewed and clad in a garment none can take away.  
Creator God, preserve in peace all those that worship you this day.  
Strengthen their arms with power,  
undergird them in adversity with your strength,  
sustain all people who cry to you with your grace,  
and preserve them in a peace which is only yours to give. Amen.*