

Faith Mennonite Church
12/30/07

What child is this, who, laid to rest, on Joseph's lap is sleeping?

Matthew 2:13-23

Greetings to you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, from St. Mark's United Church of Christ, Bloomington, MN and Good Shepherd Care Center, St. Paul, MN. Free and forgiven by the grace of God, it is my humble pleasure to stand in this house of God, Faith Mennonite, a means of grace on earth.

When people come and stay in nursing homes, often they become separated from their old, familiar circles. Away from the diners they used to eat at, away from the neighborhood parks they used to take a walk in, and away from the churches they used to worship at, their long-established ties get weak, if not entirely lost.

The nursing home I work at in the east side of St. Paul is no exception. It is particularly sad to witness that an amazing number of people have either no or very little ties with their families any longer. Sometimes their families live physically far away from the east side of St. Paul. But often times what keeps the families away is not the physical distance but the oft complicated histories between them, whether it is a history of physical and psychological abuse, chemical dependence, or poverty.

It is one of my joyous moments at the nursing home when I witness the presence of strong family involvement, and what an impact it has on the residents' quality of life! One of the residents with severe dementia... her small room is filled with cards and letters sent by her family members all the time! Normally she does not speak at all. But when I open and read cards and letters to her, her face gets so richly animated, and she says, "Oh, that's my daughter..." When I show the photos of her newborn grandson, she says, "Oh...he is so pretty..."

Inside and outside Christian churches, where there seems to be a sharp divide between the liberal camp and the conservative camp, the word "family" often gets used to define who *we* are and who *they* are. Right now, some politicians are claiming to be the "strong family values" candidates, while others are claiming to be the "strong advocates for the middle class families," just to name a few examples.

But there are many types of families around. Families that are physically close but emotionally distant, and families that are physically distant but emotionally close, large-sized families, and small nuclear families, families headed by two parents, and families headed by single parents... and there is a family of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus...

In today's story an angel of the Lord visits Joseph in his dream *again*. Earlier the angel told Joseph to take Mary as his wife and accept Jesus as the child from the Holy Spirit. This time, the angel warns Joseph, like a spy leaking a secret plan of the enemy, that his child's life is in danger.

How terrified Joseph must be! The soldiers of the politically powerful will soon come knocking on every door, turning every manger upside down, and chasing every crying baby's voice they can hear, in order to find and kill his child.

So father Joseph gets up, takes his son and wife Mary by night and flees. From Bethlehem to Egypt, and over to Nazareth...it is going to be a long journey, especially for a family with a new born baby who needs a lot of care. Joseph's child's time can be up at any moment. "Is our child going to be the next?" "Am I going to lose him tomorrow?"

In the midst of a violent world this father is trying to protect his child whose blood he does not share. However people might think about his relationship to his child, and however the child came into the family, and however difficult the time gets, for Joseph, Jesus *is* his child. And for Jesus, Joseph is the only father he knows on earth.

The absence of biological bond does not lead Joseph to forsake his child or to abandon his parental responsibility of protection. Instead, the spiritual bond between the *adoptive* father and the *adopted* child, mediated by the agent of the LORD, persists, and the rather unconventional holy *adoptive* family is formed and survives.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, I was once adopted. I am NOT talking about my genetic history but the story of my Christian faith.

I grew up with my biological parents who were constantly fighting and often harshly arguing. My father was both physically and emotionally absent from my childhood. So in my life's key moments, I do not recall that he was ever close to me.

My brothers and I left home with my mother when their divorce was finalized. One year later, my conversion to the Christian faith came as a shock as well as an insult to the single-mother who was raising three teenager boys under her maiden name "Moriichi."

By becoming a Christian, I must refuse to participate in the traditional religious practices of the family, like worshipping the ancestors' spirits or making food offerings at the Buddhist altar. First, my mother discouraged me from receiving baptism. When she learned that my commitment was too strong to break, she said, "That is fine. But do keep in mind that you will no longer be welcome at Moriichi family gatherings!"

Long physically separated from my father and newly rejected by my mother, my source of comfort and protection was always found in *the church*. I became a part of this *unconventional* family, made up of people who are not defined biologically but bound spiritually, where all were children of God, brothers and sisters in the name of Jesus.

I once was lost in my biological family; but I was found in the new *adoptive* family, the church.

Although adoption has been widely practiced for a long time and has become popular in our society, adoptive families are still uncommon, unconventional, in the minority compared to biological families.

But for the family of faith, adoption is the norm, not an aberration, as we are "called out" (*ekklesia* in Gk) of where we are in the world to join a people called "Christians." Thus, for us, the family of faith – the Church Universal -- becomes the primary source of identity and the most immediate location of belonging in this world. In this sense, we have all experienced divine adoption in one way or another.

May the glory of God be manifested in your family in this Christmas season. Amen.

Shuji Moriichi