

CULTIVATING A TRIBAL CHURCH

Preached by the Reverend Sarah Segal McCaslin

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Scripture: Ruth 1:1-18; Mark 12:28-34

When I first moved to New York City ten and a half years ago, I knew almost nobody. I moved here with a college friend, and we shared a tiny, one-bedroom apartment in the East Village. We were each other's only support network for a long time. We shared everything- a bedroom, a closet, the tiniest bathroom you have ever seen, and an astonishingly large rent for approximately 400 square-feet. After about a year, I started to make some new friends. Another college acquaintance moved into the neighborhood, and she introduced me to her college roommate, who had also moved to the city, and a childhood friend still living in Westchester County, as well as the college friend of a high school friend. Does that make sense? After a few months of living right around the corner from these new friends, I moved farther uptown and couldn't simply cross First Avenue to see them.

Well, this was the very end of the 90s and the early 2000s, and the TV show the X-Files was in its final seasons. It aired on Sunday nights at 9pm. Every one of my new friends LOVED X-Files (I hated it!), and so we began to gather at one another's apartments on Sunday night to watch it together. Well, the East Villagers wanted to stay in the East Village, and the Upper East Sider wanted to stay uptown, and I was in Hell's Kitchen and didn't want to leave my apartment, and so we began to lure each other to our own neighborhood, promising a 3-course meal, then a 4-course, then an outrageous 5-course dinner! It was ridiculous. Whoever had the best menu for the night won- and the rest of us got on the subway for home-cooked food and sci-fi TV.

Apparently, and I have no recollection of this, I was the one who first started calling these evenings- Family Dinner. The name stuck, and once X-Files went off the air, Sunday Family Dinners continued. They were usually, though not always, on Sunday nights, and involved large casseroles of vegetarian shepherds' pie or lasagna or burritos, and bottles of cheap red wine. Over the years, three of us got married, one moved away, another moved away and came back, and now two have babies and another is engaged to be married next year. This past Sunday, we gathered to celebrate one among us who ran the NYC marathon for the first time. We fed her pizza, massaged her feet, curled up on the couch and let her regale us with her stories. These people are my family. We are not related by blood, we have very different careers, sort-of similar political leanings, a wide variety of interests, and a shared love of cheese, in all its forms. But they are my New York City family, and I couldn't have made this place my home without them.

This configuration of relationships is what many now call an urban tribe. The term was coined by Ethan Watters, a journalist and accidental sociologist.¹ In Watters' formulation, an urban tribe is a collection of people who genuinely care about each other. The strength of the bond within the group can not be adequately explained through either the connections that brought them together in the first place or any shared interests or avocations... If you think about it, it's a pretty vague definition for a sociological term. Every urban tribe is unique, identified more by what they don't have in common than by what they do. One of the few defining characteristics of an urban tribe is the fact that most tribes are comprised of unmarried, college-

educated individuals in their post-college and pre-family phase of life- a phase, importantly, that lasts considerably longer than in previous generations. This is the crux of the urban tribe phenomenon. People are marrying later, or not at all; having children later, or not at all; living away from extended and immediate family. The traditional family arrangement is no longer the norm, and so people have begun to form their own, self-identified “families.”

This description of the urban tribe as a nontraditional family unit inspired Carol Howard Merritt to write a book entitled *Tribal Church*.² Merritt is a Presbyterian pastor in Washington, DC, in her mid-30s, married with a child. Her book, while devoted primarily to the theme of ministering to adults in their 20s/30s, describes what she refers to as a tribal church. For Merritt, the example of urban tribes of young people informs her notion of the church when it is at its best.

The idea of a church being tribal sounds exotic, but it is not a tribe in the reality-television sense of the word, or even the Levi-Strauss anthropological understanding. The tribal church is a church that has stripped away trendy garb and fancy gimmicks, leaving a community that is intentional, intergenerational, incarnational and inclusive. For Merritt, a tribal church is gathered together around the common cause of connecting to God in worship and relationship; it goes about the work of providing basic care to its members- to the elderly widow whose children live out of town, to the 25 year-old who is new to the city and lacks the support network of family and friends; it embodies the message that “God longs for us to care for one another as Christ cared for us;” and it welcomes everybody, not just to sit in the pews, but to join in leadership and decision-making.

And, for Merritt, the tribal church is rooted in the stories of our faith.

The Book of Ruth tells the story of loyalty and faithfulness between a “tribe” of two women- or more specifically, between a woman and her mother-in-law. Ruth and Naomi come from different places and different religions. They are linked only by marriage- and that linkage all but dissolves when Naomi’s son and Ruth’s husband, dies. There are no grandchildren to bind Ruth and Naomi; Naomi is herself a widow who has lost both sons.

There is nothing left to keep these two women together, and yet... When Naomi sends her daughters-in-law back to their mothers’ houses, Ruth refuses. For reasons unknown, Ruth clings to Naomi, binding herself and her fate to Naomi and her people and her God. Ruth and Naomi form a tribe, a relationship of genuine caring, connected by a delicate and enduring thread. The story is meant to be read in its entirety, so that we might see the thread of grace unspool from those first, moving words of Ruth- “Where you go, I will go; where you lodge I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die- there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!”

According to rabbinic tradition, the main theme of Ruth is *chesed*, a Hebrew word that is difficult to translate, because there is no English equivalent. Most often, it is translated as loving-kindness, loyalty or faithfulness born of a sense of caring and commitment. In the Hebrew Bible, God’s *chesed* is that sure love which will not let God’s people go. No matter how wayward the people become, God is faithful still.

In Psalm 59, the psalmist writes, “I will sing praises to you, for you, O God, are my fortress, the God who shows me steadfast love- *chesed*.”

In Genesis 19, God preserves the life of Lot, and Lot responds- “your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness- chesed- in saving my life.”

In Deuteronomy, “Know therefore that the Lord your God is God, the faithful God who maintains covenant loyalty- chesed- with those who love God and keep God’s commandments.”

All of the main characters in the Book of Ruth... act with chesed. They are ordinary people, but they act in extraordinary ways. Naomi, although she technically has no responsibility for her widowed daughters-in-law, is concerned that they find new husbands; she goes out of her way to see that Ruth does. Ruth, on her part, has no obligation to Naomi, but she clings to her, giving up her native land and religion; all of Ruth’s actions are directed toward finding support and protection for Naomi.”³ And she does. Ruth encounters a kinsman of Naomi’s, and through a complicated dance of seduction, negotiation and pleading, finds a husband, the father to her son, protection for Naomi, and ultimately, her own place in the storied history of Israel, as the great grandmother of David, the mighty king.

Past heartache and hardship, through famine and death, Ruth and Naomi forge a path, following that delicate thread, holding on to it for dear life, and finding, in their companionship, new life. The shared pain of the past transformed into shared hope for the future. In that little tribe of two, Ruth clings with fierce love and loyalty, ready to follow her commitment through to death and beyond. Ruth’s devotion to Naomi is God’s chesed.

Ruth, a foreigner and outsider, a convert to the religion of the one God, becomes a model of God’s faithfulness, and her story woven into the fabric of our faith.

The community that formed around Jesus was a tribe, as unexpected as the tribe of two, foreign women. They were an odd bunch of individuals- foreigners and tax collectors and sinners and fishermen and women- connected by that same thread of grace and God’s chesed. Their oddness caused a lot of trouble, made Jesus’ critics tremble with fury and indignation. The motto of that tribe was so simple, so distilled from the traditions that preceded it, and yet there was nothing simple about how they were called to live. Love all others as much as you love God. This is the greatest commandment, attached at the hip to its companion- love God with your whole heart and mind and soul and strength, and then, love your neighbor as yourself. Not interchangeable, and yet neither commandment able to stand on its own. So Jesus and his followers created a community based on that. They found a human arrangement where the members of that tribe could best participate in the exercises of faith.

As much as I appreciate the concept of the urban tribe and its ability to illuminate truths about human connection, there are unavoidable limits to the urban tribe. The urban tribe is not built to last. Oftentimes, as individuals become couples, and couples become families, the urban tribe splinters and spreads apart. And the urban tribe lacks rich traditions and rituals and disciplines to connect its members to one another over generations.

The vast majority of the people who visit our church and attend our Inquirers’ Classes are moving into a new phase of life and searching for connection in the midst of their displacement. They are engaged or newly married or starting a family or single and new to the city. Though our newer members are overwhelming young people in their 20s/30s, there are plenty of others as well. There are empty-nesters, figuring out life as a couple again; the newly retired, faced with finding a new identity not defined by a career; some are coming out of a painful divorce and

searching for a fresh start; some are new arrivals to New York City, leaving behind vast networks of friends and family to follow a job, or find a job.

You see, the church is the ideal place to create a tribe. The church contains rituals that mark the passage from one life phase to the next. The church celebrates tradition. The church cares for its own. The church grows and changes to accommodate the needs of its members, rather than asking its members to grow and accommodate to the needs of the church. The church creates opportunities to develop deep spiritual practices and disciplines of worship, prayer and action.

One illustration of the church as tribal that really stands out for me is the sacrament of Baptism. We welcome new members into the Body of Christ, the faith community, by promising to look after them, to care for them, to be teachers and disciples and friends. On those Sunday mornings when parents stand up at the front of the church with their children, or when adults stand up for themselves, everybody in the sanctuary pledges their support. To use familiar terminology, the whole church becomes the godparents of the newly baptized. It is a large and diverse family, meant to last a lifetime. God has opened the doors of family wide, showing us that we do not have to have the bond of blood to be family.

We can continue the process of cultivating a tribal church by striving for the qualities that Merritt identifies- intentional, intergenerational, incarnational and inclusive. We can be intentional in our conversations with one another, after worship, at coffee hour, in committee meetings - talking about how we can better care for one another, beginning with the most basic care. For instance, do you have plans for Thanksgiving? There are some among us who do not have the time or money to travel home to be with their family. Do you have an extra seat at your table to invite someone to join you?

We can become more intergenerational by collaborating on programs that foster new relationships across age groups. Do you have friends in the church who are significantly younger than you, or significantly older than you? If not, how can you make those connections?

We can be the Body of Christ in the world, carrying the gospel message of God's love in our hands and feet, by feeding the hungry and housing the homeless and caring for the least among us. How are you involved in the outreach ministries of the church?

We can be truly inclusive when we eliminate any standards, spoken or unspoken, for entry into the church, not just in worship, but in other parts of church life as well. Who do we leave out of the leadership of our church? How can we invite them in?

These are the hallmarks of the tribal church, and I encourage you to consider them thoughtfully. You are responsible for the people sitting around you in the pews, and they are responsible for you. Ask for help if you need it, and offer help when you don't. Resist the urge to be self-sufficient; develop a collective understanding of caretaking. And then you will be a tribal church. You will exemplify chesed. You will embody the greatest commandment. And you will extend that thread of grace forward into the wideness of God's extraordinary family.

¹ Ethan Watters. *Urban Tribes: A Generation Redefines Friendship, Family and Commitment* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003).

² Carol Howard Merritt. *Tribal Church: Ministering to the Missing Generation* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2007).

³ Adele Berlin. "Ruth" in *Harper's Bible Commentary*, James L. Mays, General Editor (New York: Harper Collins, 1988) p. 262.