

“Thicker Than Water?”
A Sermon for the 22nd Assembly of the Metropolitan Chicago Synod

Based on Ephesians 4

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Sermon begins with the bishop displaying a bandage in the crook of his arm... He then shows a syringe full of “blood.” Finally he goes to the font and draws a small vial of water after which, he holds the water and the blood up side by side...

You know I honestly can't tell. Do you think it's true?... I mean do you think the old saying is true that blood is thicker than water? They actually look about the same to me... which I suppose is not surprising given the fact that water is far and away the dominant component of blood and foundation upon which blood is built.

Still, whether or not it is actually thicker, blood is certainly stickier than water... as you know if you have ever felt blood on the surface of your skin when you have a cut. And, in fact, it may be the stickiness more than the thickness of it that gives rise to the old saying... which I think is just another way of saying that the bonds of family, heredity, and culture provide the sticky material that is actually necessary to hold relationships, societies or communities together.

And I would say that there is at least some measure of truth in this aspect of the saying, as you also know if you have ever experienced a teacher or a member of the church or a neighbor or a stranger criticize or reprimand one of your children. Because in that moment of hearing the harsh critical words or the put down, even if you know they are right, there is something inside of you that just can't help but spring to the defense of the little one who is bone of your bone and flesh of your flesh.

There are occasionally times, of course, when the stickiness of blood gets taxed to the breaking point... like when your good-for-nothing unemployed brother-in-law comes to visit for a week and stays for a month and he gradually mutates from the one you stick with to the one you are stuck with...

And then there is adolescence when the stickiness of the blood develops a distinct clotting disorder. And you think, as you look over there at that purple hair... and the ring in her nose and those clothes that they wear... you think in that moment someone must have switched cribs in the hospital nursery... And I will admit that there were a few times for me too of realizing that the familial bond was so weak during those years, that there was nothing much to do except to sing myself to sleep every night with the prayer on my lips, “Remember, Lord, he is baptized... You promised...”

Interestingly, this experience with the unpredictable stickiness of blood seems to lead us to search for all manner of other things that we can use as the adhesive that holds us together.

Language is certainly a popular favorite, and culture of origin is another. Sometimes even having a neighborhood that we all grew up in or a college experience, where we can all sing the school song from memory with a quiet tear rolling down our cheek:

*By the mighty Mississippi, on a rocky shore,
Stands the school we love so dearly now and
evermore...*

Well what can I say? It can't be the beauty of the music that sticks us together; it must be something in the poetry...

But musical taste, by the way, is yet another substance that we often use to identify those who we will stick by through thick and thin. And these days it is electrons more than platelets that hold us together in our chat rooms and Google groups and RSS feeds and Twitter talk.

A more sinister expression of blood kinship is the way we have come to make personal opinion or issue positions the sticky stuff that holds us together, as if party politics or intellectual assent to a point of view were the glue that could bind us as one. And then, of course, there are the Bloods... or the Crips or the Kings who find a singularly dark cohesive force in the shedding of other people's blood as well as their own.

Even in those family ties where the whole idea of the thickness of blood first began... sometimes I wonder if it is really the blood that holds things together or if it is instead the family secret... the secret of an addiction, or an affair, or a pattern of intimidation, violence, abuse or some other gorilla in our living room that cements the family into a tight circular wall that no fresh air or even light can penetrate.

Certainly it is true that Jesus came into a world where blood was thicker than water... an entire social system stuck together by who you were related to or who you were descended from... a world where women and children had no identity at all apart from the man whose name or whose blood they shared... a world where by levitical law it was perfectly acceptable to keep slaves as long as they were not people of your own... blood.

But Jesus managed to unstuck himself from the bondage of all that blood bonding with a life and a ministry that severed the old connections. He broke through old understandings of family with a provocative question about who were his true brothers and sisters and mother. He broke through adherence to the structures of race, social status, ritual, custom, sectarianism and nationalism that everyone else believed were holding things together... he broke through all of this with his compassion for foreigners and lepers and outcasts and women... and with a somewhat flexible interpretation of the Sabbath laws and rituals.

And then he sent his new family of fisher folk out from the side of the sea into the whole world to baptize... one baptism into one Lord, one faith, and one God... apparently because he believed that water was enough... that ordinary water was thick enough and sticky enough to hold together a new creation.

We who are gathered here face challenging times, sisters and brothers. We face challenging times because there are many, many things in our lives and in our world claiming to be the tie that binds. We have seen it here in our very own synod and throughout our church over the years as the one faith in the one Lord becomes increasingly atomized... atomized into the fine mist of a thousand narrow special interests all claiming to be or to have the true glue. And now, once again this summer, we stare into the possibility that the body of the living Christ will be dismembered before our eyes and his precious blood again poured out onto the ground because of a difference of opinion... a difference of opinion about who is acceptable and who is not... who is in the family and who is not of our blood. So when, I wonder... when will the blood-letting end? Is it our testimony to the world that the sanctity of our opinions is the sticky stuff that holds the universe together?

The carnage ends, my friends, when ordinary Christians... people like you and I... actually start to believe the promise of the new covenant. The blood-letting ends when we find the courage to stand up to this world and proclaim the utterly implausible truth that water... plain old water... cool clear water... is thicker than blood, thicker than theological nit-picking, thicker than our confidence in our own righteousness.

The new age begins when we discover our new blood in the water.

The new creation begins when you decide to bear witness by the example of your own life that the hope of the world depends upon calling others into the same deep crystalline pool from which you yourself have already been called up.

New life begins when you find the courage to hear and follow the voice of the Jesus who once found water thick enough to support his own weight on a long walk from the boat to the beach... because it is this same Jesus that calls to you now to remind you that the ocean of grace and truth upon which you stand is sufficient to carry you all the way to that distant shore.

Amen.