

High St Uniting Frankston

Widen the Family Circle - Matthew 12: 46 - 50, Jeremiah 29: 1 - 7



During the week I was watching *Who do you think you are?*, the American version, and they were looking at the ancestors of Smokey Robinson, the Motown singer and songwriter. It turns out that his grandfather was a preacher in Tennessee and Alabama only a generation after the Civil War, and his great grandfather had been a slave. In following the story of his

grandfather, Smokey spoke to a current minister about life in an African American church 100 to 150 years ago. Imagine spending your week being rejected, told you can't enter shops and being called 'boy', or 'girl', or worse, and then on Sunday being welcomed into church and called 'brother' and 'sister' and joining together in a family of faith. And if you can imagine that then you have some idea of the reception of Jesus words in that house by the sea of Galilee where he was teaching. I know people who don't like this story because they feel offended on behalf of Mary and Jesus brothers, but they miss the point. Jesus didn't reject his mother and brothers; he took the opportunity to widen the definition of family. In that crowded house would have been people turned away from the synagogue because of some slip up in following the Law. In that crowd would have been women, normally not allowed to sit and listen to a rabbi. For those people to hear the wonderful welcoming title of 'brother' and 'sister', would have been heart-warming, and affirming, and life changing. And you can trace a direct connection between this story and the inclusive worshipping communities of the early church. Slaves, beggars, soldiers, women, welcomed in along with teachers and merchants and the rich. This is who we are called to be, the welcoming family of God. However, unfortunately, there are communities who understand the 'family of God' bit, and happily call each other brother and sister, but who draw a big line around the church and treat the rest of the world with distrust. Rather than a welcoming community of God's love, they act more like a modern Noah's Ark or lifeboat. And that is why we heard the reading from Jeremiah. In faith and love we are called to widen the family circle.

Dragged away from Jerusalem and taken to Babylon as prisoners and slaves, the Israelites would have had good reason to hunker down in an exclusive community of race and faith, waiting for the day when God would release them. But the word of God from Jeremiah said, "No, you can be faithful to God and your culture and still engage with the surrounding culture. Don't treat the world with distrust but seek the welfare of the city and pray for them. Have children and let your sons and daughters marry, you are going to be there a long time." I can imagine the effect of that letter, particularly as time went on. Seeking the welfare of the city meant more than economics. It wouldn't just be their own sons and daughters who were marrying. Just like the sojourn of Naomi and Elimelech into Moab gives us Ruth as an ancestor of David, how many sons and daughters of Babylon got welcomed into the faith and family of God? And, of course many scholars will tell us of the deep influence of Babylon on the ancient stories of Israel - the garden of Eden is in Babylon, the tower of Babel looks a lot like the ziggurats of Babylon, and

even father Abraham comes from Chaldea. Widening the family circle and engaging with the world around doesn't mean abandoning faith or dropping principles or betraying God. God is bigger and more loving and more inclusive than our limited ideas of God or facets of understanding. Brothers and sisters are not just those who have the same background, baptism, theology, or membership. In faith and love and obedience we are called to widen the family circle.

A similar message comes through the stories contained in the book of Acts. While the apostles understood the idea of the welcoming family of God and built a wonderful community that, according to the text, grew daily, they had a big hole in their understanding when it came to Gentiles. Time and again in the first 15 chapters of Acts God tries to break down the idea that the family of God in Jesus Christ is to be Jewish, or at least faithful to the Jewish Law. The experience of Peter with the vision of animals and his ministry with Cornelius, the call of Paul and his ministry through what is now Turkey, and then the big confrontation in the Council of Jerusalem, all to get the idea across that the line they had drawn was too restrictive and they needed to widen the circle of God's love to bring in the whole family of people made in the image of God.

One of the delights of the Uniting Church is our strong tradition of ecumenical engagement, seeing other churches as fellow brothers and sisters is a joy. But there is much more to this story of Jesus calling all who do the will of God 'brothers' and 'sisters' than ecumenism. Shifting our ministry focus from 'doing things for people' to 'working with people' opens up the understanding and possibility of all people being 'brothers and sisters.' Engaging, respecting, talking, and listening are all part of the hospitality of welcoming people into the family of God's love, treating people as brothers and sisters.

When people talk about Christians having family values, tell them about this story and the welcoming, inclusive, faithful family of all people who do the will of God, our heavenly Father.