

## ***“We are family”***

**September 12, 2010**

*Text: Psalm 51:1-10, Luke 15:1-10*

### I.

Remember the hit song from 1979, ***We Are Family***, by Sister Sledge?

*We are family  
I got all my sisters with me  
We are family  
Get up everybody and sing.*

I remember the tune well. Never really knew the lyrics until I looked for them online. ***We Are Family*** became a theme song for the Pittsburgh Pirates baseball team for a time and was also used at one of the major political party’s National Convention in 2004; and its been in a number of movies as well.

***We are family!***

***We are family*** is the theme for our RALLY DAY celebration. And why not? Since our Creator God breathed life into the likes of Adam and Eve, *families* have been the core social unit in the creative ordering of things.

Families are what we are about. They are the core of our identity. Our passions and affections for our families are built into our DNA. Indeed, the blood lines are thick.

In casual conversation, we hear people say all the time: *You’re like family*. On the surface, that’s one of the most complimentary things a person can say about us: *You’re like family*. As our lives play out, that can be a lot to live up to.

### II.

In the church, we like to describe ourselves as family: *our church family*, we say, all the time. For a church to indeed be like a family is no small matter. For, to be family is to be like **Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood**. Remember Mr. Rogers?

Originally, his TV show was called ***Mister Rogers***. However, later, he changed it to ***Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*** because he didn’t want children to think the show was about him.

- He wanted them to think it was a place they could visit. What sort of a place?
- A place of grace where children would be accepted and loved just as they are.

*You are special*, he would say, *and so is your neighborhood*. In that special place, children felt like they fit in. There would always be a place for them at the table.

At our best, that's an ideal description for a church as well: a special place where everybody fits in, where everybody has a place at the table. It's a sacred space—where we are accepted and loved just as we are.

*The church as family*, therefore, is a place of acceptance; it's a place where the grace of forgiveness pours over us; a place where we can be ourselves, with no airs, no pretenses.

### III.

On the UCC calendar, the theme for this Sunday's worship is *Growing in God's Love*. Interestingly enough, one of the scripture readings from the Hebrew Scriptures is from **Psalm 51**, the deeply confessional Psalm attributed to King David after his adulterous affair with Bathsheba and his evil maneuverings that followed.

*Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy, blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.*

And, then, later ...

*Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.*

This Psalm is about forgiveness. It's about cleansing our old self and opening ourselves to the *new spirit* God nurtures in us today. At some point in our lives, we all need this forgiveness.

Forgiveness, of course, is an expression of grace, of God's infinite acceptance of each of us, amidst all of our personal differences and oddities. Our individuality is an expression of the diversity of God's creative hand.

Much of the tension and divide in our country and in our world is over individual differences. We see this, in part, in the *ground zero* controversy; just as we see it, too, in the recent wave of phobias that are rising up across our nation.

Phobias are deep seeded fears, sometimes with little logic to support them.

1. Fears of immigrants, for example, in the face of the irrefutable reality that we've all come from immigrant families at some point.
2. And fears of Islam ... when in fact it's only a very small percentage of Muslims who are not good, law-abiding citizens of the planet like the rest of us.

Our natural tendency as human beings is to want everyone to be like us. To look like us ... talk like us ... dress like us ... vote like us ... believe like us ... and on and on.

Differences, naturally, make us nervous. Yet, it's these very differences that provide the impulse for our personal growth. Think about it!

In our families, the blood lines run deep. In our culture and around the world, all the time, we see families adjusting ... bending over backwards ... stretching and growing ... in order to NOT reject another family member. At their best, families accept one another (it may take some major effort). Why? Because our blood-lines run deep. We're family—fruits of the same seed.

We see this in inter-ethnic and inter-racial marriages and with our gay or lesbian children. Parents who might otherwise reject a person on the basis of race or sexual orientation are more likely to grow to the point of acceptance of these differences when—suddenly—it's their child or grandchild.

*We are family*—here at our church—means *we accept you* and hope you'll accept us. Whoever you are, however God made you, we accept the uniqueness and the diversity of God's creative hand. And if you're perhaps a little different, so much the better. We all have our differences; and our welcoming and including of one another makes us all better.

#### IV.

Families also *take care of one another*. We may not necessarily like each other all the time, but—again—the love goes deep.

- Think about your own life and the adjustments and sacrifices many of you have made for family over the years.
- In our families, we stand with one another, taking care of each other, through thick and through thin.

At our best, families are wonderfully resilient and our deep-seeded passions and love can go a long way in facilitating our personal growth. Families take care of everybody—everybody in the family, regardless of their possible deficiencies or shortcomings. Again, *we're family*.

Much like in Jesus' **Parable of the Lost Sheep**, *the least of these*—the little ones, the ones that need to be lifted up; they'll be looked after and taken care of.

In the parable, Jesus says to the grumbling Pharisees and scribes of his day,

**Check it out! If you had a hundred sheep and you lost one of them, wouldn't you leave the ninety-nine wherever you are and go look for the sheep that is lost until**

**you find him? Of course you would! And then when you found it, you'd celebrate and you'd invite your friends and neighbors to join you, saying to them: *Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.***

In the larger sense, this parable is about God's redemptive love for the lost, for the sinners of the earth. But it also reveals God's tireless compassion for *the least of these*.

In much the same way, our families, too—at their best—care about all of their family members. And sometimes, particularly the ones who are the most vulnerable, the most handicapped or different in whatever way.

## V.

There was a TV special some years back on heroic mothers. One of the mothers being interviewed had single-handedly raised a large family. In the face of all kinds of obstacles, she had persevered and every one of her children had gone on to great success as adults.

Her story was inspirational because it revealed the heights and depths of human love. During the interview, the reporter asked her what was her secret?

*I suppose you loved all your children equally,* he said to her, *making sure they all got the same treatment!!*

The mother replied, *Oh, I loved them all very much, but not equally.*

- *I loved the one the most that was down until he was up.*
- *I loved the one the most that was weak until she was strong.*
- *I loved the one the most that was hurt until he was healed.*
- *And I loved the one the most that was lost until she was found.*

At our best, that's what we do in the church as well. We seek to be there for one another in the crucible of whatever it is we are dealing with. We take care of one another. And, at our best, along the way, hopefully, we're patient ... and tolerant. And hopefully, as well, we're good listeners, compassionate and generous in spirit.

Why? Because it's the *loving* thing to do; and it's what Jesus would do. As his followers, that's what he commands us to do in his name.

## VI.

***We are family*** is a lofty goal for any church. But friends, when we are faithful to this goal, the circle of our church widens. It becomes even more open ... more welcoming ... and more inclusive.

We have a lot of craziness in our world today, some of which we've alluded to earlier. We talk every week about our struggling economy and the widening divide in the cultures' war. And amidst it all, our challenge is to enlarge the circle of our love and to enlarge our family.

Families do this because, in part, they don't have much choice. They're family. How can we reject our own flesh and blood? At the end of the day, we can't; it's too much. Churches do it because we're commanded to do it. That's what it means to *be* the church. Always, always, always, love is the language of the church.

Love, *which bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things and endures all things* (1 Corinthians 13). Love, which never ends—the same love, which prompts us each one to grow and move closer to the Kingdom of God.

***We are family!***

**All praise be unto God! Amen!**

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz  
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*  
6701 Miami Lakeway South  
Miami Lakes, FL 33014  
On the web at [www.mlchurch.com](http://www.mlchurch.com)