

“Love Over Blood”
(Mark 3:31-35)

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Mission Statements

One of the things churches do periodically to stay on course is scrutinize their mission statement. A mission statement should be short and sweet. It should answer in a nutshell, what the guiding purpose of the church is. And in fact, a by-laws committee here at Montague has just been formed to look at our bylaws to see where we can update them in a way that will help us all be the church in as fulfilling and faithful a way as we can.

Last week after talking to a congregation member, it occurred to me that it might be worthwhile for me to clarify what my own personal mission statement is, and to share it with you. Coming up with a personal mission statement would be a good way to clarify for myself, what it is I wish to do. And it would help you to know what your minister thinks he is doing.

This might also prompt you to think about what your own personal mission statement might be. Because, as scripture points out, and as we affirmed last Sunday through naming some of the “saints, God uses his children to provide for each other in many and diverse ways.

Each one of us, as a member of the “Priesthood of all believers,” is a deacon, a Christian educator, a caregiver, a greeter, a property manager, a budgeter all wrapped up in one. And we have a sense of which of these are our strong suits, which we would like to grow into and which are better left to others. So, what is that inner strength within you, that you would like to polish and hone, until you become like the polished pebble that slays Goliath and frees the children of God?

So, I came up with a personal mission statement. But before sharing it with you, I’d like to share my experience of what we are up against. Because my sense of mission is a response to it.

Our Worldly Dilemma

I don’t think anyone would argue with the fact that we are living in a time of deep division, distrust and fear. Trust in our institutions, including the church, has been eroding for a long time. Our democracy is struggling and when I sense what might be replacing it, I am greatly distressed. I sum up where we are headed in the word “tribalism.”

A number of years ago, I remember watching a documentary on Afghanistan. In it, the narrator was describing the disaster that we spent the last twenty years there trying to fix. And as he spoke, wandering around in the background were dusty looking men in turbans carrying weapons.

Afghanistan was and still is, a country full of competing war-lords each presiding over their tribal realms and using charisma, enticements and force to get what they can, whenever they can. It is a society that seems incapable of coming together under an overall system of laws. And because they are unable to free themselves from their tribal attitudes, the people suffer. As we speak, they are facing the threat of mass starvation.

As I watched that footage, I remember shaking my head in sadness at the unnecessary suffering, but I also remember feeling thankful that I would never live in such a society. But now I'm not so sure we are that different. The fire of anger and resentment burning under the turbans of these weapons carrying jihadists in Afghanistan, as they listen to the enflamed rhetoric of their angry charismatic leaders, seems little different to me than what I am seeing in our own country. We have only to trade the turbans for baseball caps, the Korans for Bibles and

we can see that we are moving away from a nation united under laws and toward becoming a landscape of warring tribes.

Tribal and Blood

What frightens me most is the power of the emotions that undergird tribal behavior. Allegiance to the tribe taps into deep feelings of devotion and loyalty that develop out of a shared experience. And along with this comes an inability to relate to the needs and concerns of any who are not its members, viewing them as potential intruders.

And very often the deepest sign of this shared devotion is the idea of blood relationship. We all know the power of blood as a symbol; how we can literally feel our blood going into a commotion inside us, when our deepest allegiances are triggered. And tribalism draws heavily on these powerful feelings.

I would not be surprised if the tribal as a way of life is not, in some ways instinctive; that we may be genetically wired to think and behave tribally, considering that for many thousands of years, prior to “civilization,” our ancestors survived by living in tribes.

My Mission Statement

And so I think to myself, in the face of this reality, what is my mission statement? My mission statement stands in opposition to the way of the tribe. My desire is to foster a community whose first allegiance is to the love of Christ, a love that refuses the primal pull we feel to circle the wagons or to reserve our compassion and support only for members of our tribe or for blood relatives.

My mission statement then is “Love over Tribe.” And this commitment is not just mine. I believe it is rooted in and inspired by the words and deeds of Jesus in the Gospels.

It’s Foundation in the Gospels

Many, when they first hear the words of this morning’s Gospel reading, are surprised by the way Jesus treats his mother and brothers. When family comes calling, we imagine that, like a dutiful son Jesus would stop what he is doing and give them a few minutes of his time.

But instead, he brushes them aside, saying: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And then looking around at his disciples, he says to them, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

It is a harsh rebuff that seem astounding to us, accustomed as we are to thinking of Jesus as a champion of family values. Consider also what he said to his disciples at the very beginning of his ministry, when he called them to leave their families behind to follow him. When they asked him whether they could go home first, to set things straight and make a proper goodbye, he told them, “Let the dead bury the dead!” It is a strange response. But it signaled Jesus’s unwillingness to let family ties get in the way of the path he set before them.

So is Jesus anti-family? I don’t think so. I think it would be better to say that he is sending a clear message; that when we choose to follow him, our primary loyalty and our relationships can no longer be based on blood relationship or culture. They are instead based on our sharing in his life and vision. And like the disciples we too have to decide which has the priority.

And because Jesus’s definition of family is no longer limited to blood relations, the possibilities for what the word “family” can mean are suddenly exploded way beyond any biological limitations. So that, although my DNA comes from half way around the world, in Christ’s love, I am your “true” sibling and we are part of a family that is meant

to extend “to the ends of the earth” and to one day include everyone we could possibly meet.

And for those among us who have pets or feel a kinship with the animal world, why should the extension of our love and sense of kinship stop even at the boundaries of our species?

(If only so many lonely people who have been conditioned to see churches as exclusive clubs, could be aware of this breathtaking vision of Jesus – what it means that you don’t have to be blood siblings to be brothers and sisters in the truest sense)

My Dilemma

I hope that this mission statement will also help to answer something about my behavior that some of you may find troubling and which I find troubling myself. And that is this: Why is it, that during this time, when there are so many pressing political issues calling for action, am I so hesitant to touch issues that are wrapped up in partisan politics?

And the reason is because politics is the very realm in which tribal behavior is being encouraged most strenuously, to the extent that many Democrats and Republicans literally refuse to marry into each other’s tribes.

I do think it is important to speak out on issues that are part of our politics. But, I also do not want to unwittingly duplicate the divisions that exist in our society in this congregation. And I pray that our fellowship can be defined, not by our nations warring tribes, but by the kinship we have in Jesus and as the family of God; a kinship that no blood relationship, political party, national identity or other allegiance should be allowed to override.

“The New Covenant in my Blood”

Now as we approach the time of communion, I'd like to leave you with a question. When Jesus is at table with his disciples and speaks the words – “this is the new covenant in my blood, shed for you and for all people” is that not just another deep expression of tribalism? Can there be any more primal way to evoke the deep emotional commitment to the tribe, than to have the drinking of the blood of our ancestor Jesus as our central ritual? Is not our identification of his blood as our blood, the most basic expression of a commitment to tribe or race?

Or is it a fantastic paradox, that when we drink the blood of Christ, are we drinking the blood of one who is anti-blood relationships in the

sense that he himself refused to put his blood relatives before his commitment to the vision of a universal family of God?

Perhaps the fire in Jesus's blood that is transferred to us is not the fire of devotion to a tribe or to a family with boundaries, but the fire of devotion to the vision of a universal family, in which covenant bonds of love, rather than blood and culture are the primary force that rules in our hearts. If we recognize that this is so, then we in the church can be a powerful response to the tribalism that is taking over our culture through its media and politics.

My Mission Statement

“Love over Tribe.”

I hope this will help you understand why I am so hesitant to step into politics or to reveal where I stand on so many of the deeply important social and political issues of our time. I am not willing to let tribe triumph over love. So if you are a democrat or you are a republican, or you feel that a political issue needs to be addressed in a partisan way, you may find me hard to read, because I am trying to preserve for us the possibility of being a community that is rooted in love and not in tribal orthodoxy.

The anti-tribal blood

Today is Communion Sunday, and so I think it is appropriate for us to talk a bit about the “Blood of Christ,” which we drink, because it is a potent symbol for our faith. When we drink the blood of Christ, we are making a physical and emotional identification with Jesus; that his blood is the blood we would like to have running through our veins. By drinking his blood, we are affirming that we are his people, down to the most physical level.

There was a Scotsman named John Moore who coined the phrase “Blood is thicker than water,” which we understand as an expression of the great power that our familial and blood relationships have over our lives.

And there is obviously much truth to it. When the names of many of the Saints of this church were read, last Sunday, and the names of my father and mother were read, I felt an extra surge of emotion welling up inside me. I am literally born of their blood. And I feel a deep and sacred sense of gratitude and pride in them. And my son, against my wishes, tattooed our family name in Japanese on his chest. I was against it, but filled with a secret pride in what he did and in the loyalty he feels toward our family name.

This allegiance that we have in the blood extends also to the native culture of our birth. Songs like “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” or parades like St. Patrick’s Day are expressions of a deep experience of attachment to Irish culture that fires the blood of those who were born into Irish culture.

When I was in high school, my family moved to Dunedin in the South Island of New Zealand. It was a community dominated by immigrants from Scotland. And so there were “Robbie Burns” Pub in every big town and a local lore about the hard working, hard drinking sheep shearing culture and exemplified in the tough game of Rugby. And so, during my high school years, I drank deeply of this Spirit, so that, even now, the mention of New Zealand or the sound of the bag pipes is like a fire in my blood.

So I think that I can say that I have had my fair share of experiencing of this powerful emotion. But perhaps my experience is different than many, in that I have had similar feelings standing before the Japanese flag, the flag of New Zealand and the American flag. And in none of these cases did it ever seem as though the way I felt was some sort of betrayal of my identity as an American.

I think that these emotions are very positive because they express a deep love we feel for the culture and place that has shaped us. On the one hand, I think they are a problem, because they lie at the heart of the tribalism that is tearing our country apart today.

The blood of Jesus is “anti-tribal”.

Over and over again during the course of history people everywhere, including Christians, have ignored the deep wisdom at the core of the Gospel message.

, or the clan culture of Scotland or the clan culture that destroyed my father’s homeland of Japan or the myth of Aryan blood that justified the horror of the concentration camps in World War 2, or the legacy of slavery. I thought we were getting beyond that. But I think that our tribal instincts just make it very hard for us to see value beyond the boundaries of the tribe and the commitment to blood relationship.