

Scripture: Exodus 20:12; Matthew 12:46-50

Sermon Title: "Chosen Family - A Camp Pride Reflection"

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Today, as we continue our journey through the Ten Commandments and as we consider the 5th commandment to honor mother and father which reminds us of the importance of respecting family, I want to talk today about family as I reflect on this past week of Camp Pride - an interfaith camp week for LGBTQ high schoolers and allies. To do this, I want to share with you a couple family photos so let me come on down so that we can all get a good look. Now, this first one includes my brother whom many of you met on his visit here a couple weeks ago, it includes my mother and father, and was taken at my ordination. For many of us, when we think of family we start with the biological. Those with whom we share genes. Still, there is more to family than just shared blood - Jesus reminds us of this in our scripture reading today. Family is not just about a shared name, it's about respect, care, and striving to live as one with a common goal of love.

So I will share with you another family photo. This one includes the campers from this past week. It includes the adults who gave a week of their time to love these kids, to care for them, to nurture them, to respect their journeys of self-discovery and self-acceptance, and be there for them through it all.

Family can take many different forms. When Jesus looks at his disciples and says here are "my mother and my brothers," he is offering us the first example within the Christian faith of chosen family. This is not to invalidate his relationship with his mother and brothers standing outside, but to affirm that family is much bigger than birth family - much greater than blood or a shared name. It's about, coming together in a spirit of love, which I believe is the will of God as summed up by Jesus in the two greatest commandments - love God, love neighbor as ourselves, and through it all, love ourselves.

In the past week, this group of beautiful and beloved people came together in a spirit of love and lived out what it meant to be family. Throughout the week, I saw campers love themselves in new and beautiful ways, a particularly glorious thing for our transgender campers. On Thursday evening, we had a dinner party and a dance – a dance during which many of our campers were wearing gender affirming clothing, some for the first or for one of the few times in their lives, dressing for who they are inside, who they know themselves to be not who the world thinks they should be. A huge highlight for me was when one of the campers came up to me and asked me to help tie his tie for this was a new thing for him on his journey of self-acceptance and transition. And as we laughed about my inability to get the length just right and as I told him about how my grandmother taught me to tie my tie because she would do it for my grandfather every Sunday, his face was just beaming because he was loving himself.

On many different occasions, I saw campers embracing one another through veils of tears and supporting each other in the traumas of life. Campers talking openly about suicide – the loss of close friends and their own battles with depression. Campers talking about family struggles and the lack of support and affirmation at home. Campers opening up about abuse they endured. One day, during our family group time, the group I was a part of was doing a labyrinth walk, and when we got to the center, one of the campers was holding a bracelet and they talked about how this bracelet was a gift from their abuser, who has since been removed from their life. And through the tears, they wanted help in letting this bracelet go in hopes that the memories of abuse would lose at least some of their power. And so, tears streaming down our faces, myself and one of the deans knelt with this youth in the middle of that labyrinth, dug a hole with our hands and buried it. And their fellow campers were there with words of hope, hugs of comfort, and presence of strength.

It wasn't all this heavy – we shared meals as a family. We shared laughs as a family – there are so many inside jokes that have now been created! We sang, we talked, we danced, we played games, we sat together as a family. At our Friday night coffee house,

we shared talents with one another, some serious, some silly, some so beautifully unexpected, and had a wonderful time, all of it enhanced by the acceptance, the affirmation, the love of family – the love of neighbor and the growing love of self which wrapped us and held us through the week. And I say us intentionally because this camp didn't only touch the lives of the campers in powerful ways, it touched the counselors too!

And through it all, we were striving to love God too. Now, for a segment of our campers, God is not an easy subject and this is true for many in the LGBTQ community because of the pain caused by so many faith groups over the years. Still, to see a campers face light up when they were asked to serve communion or to light the candle for our Friday Shabbat service, there was healing and love, as they were affirmed in their faith and their LGBTQ identity. To be told that my very existence as a Christian pastor and my presence at camp began to heal years of hurt caused by the church, there was healing and love. To see someone who did not receive communion for nearly 10 years, feel welcomed and fully affirmed at the table once more, there was healing and love.

Through it all, we became family. So I just want to end today with another “thank you”. Thank you for letting me be a part of this chosen family for the past week. Thank you for letting me be a part of a life-changing and life-saving camp for our LGBTQ youth. During this past week, God's Spirit moved in beautiful ways drawing us into family for these beautiful and beloved people are now my brothers and sisters and siblings. This is family and though we may now be apart, we will forever be together, because that is the power of family, the power of love. One more time, thank you and thanks be to God! Amen.