

Pentecost 3, Proper 5  
St. Paul's/Resurrección, Mount Vernon, WA

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## Family

I just returned from three exhilarating days at one of the two major conference centers of the Episcopal Church. I was at Kanuga for Nuevo Amanecer, a biannual gathering of people involved in Hispanic ministry, gathered by the Office for Latino Ministry and the brainchild of its director, my friend and colleague of many years, the Rev. Anthony Guillen. There was singing and dancing, and innovative worship experiences. There were solemn liturgies. There were plenary speakers and workshops on a wide variety of topics. I can tell you, Hispanic ministry in the United States is alive and well and growing!

So, what does it mean, what might it mean, for the Episcopal Church? First of all, what began as ministry TO Hispanics, largely at the parish level or diocesan programmatic level, has morphed into full-blown bilingual/bicultural congregations where ministry happens WITH Hispanics and BY Hispanics. Second, the number of bilingual/bicultural clergy in the church is booming, and third, whereas so many Anglo congregations fear the closing of their doors because they are aging out, Hispanic ministry is full of young families and lots of children. Hispanic ministry is one of the emerging growing edges of the Episcopal Church. This is no news to us, of course!

So, let's bring this home. I want to tell you two parallel family stories, separated by 21 centuries of human history. The first one begins when a young man of 30 begins to preach and teach and heal around Galilee in Judea in the first century. He is not sent by any human authority. He just shows up and begins his ministry. Some people are offended, especially from his home town of Nazareth, but others gather around him, finding his teaching life-giving: hope in the heavy darkness of Roman oppression, about the dignity of every human being, and the challenges of the social systems of his day to recognize and honor that sacred gift, and a bold confrontation of the powers that maintain them. Then he healed people, a symbol of that very life and hope he brought, a physical manifestation of his message.

In fact, so many people gather around, that it becomes something of a logistical problem: no time to eat, no time to rest, no time to recoup. Things are changing around Jesus, the status quo is being shaken, so, the people closest to him come to the conclusion that they have to do something. It's just gone too far. Mary, good Jewish mother that she is, steps in. She's gonna haul him home, give him a good talkin' to, feed him a good mother-cooked meal and tuck him into bed for some much-needed rest, all for his own good. That's what families do, right? They take care of their own, especially when their own aren't taking care of themselves.

But Jesus upsets the apple cart again. He redefines family. Oh, he is not disowning his mother here. She was still one of the women, I would imagine the queen of the group, who support him in his ministry. She is at the foot of the Cross where he cares for her as a first-born son of a widowed mother. He's just expanding family. Family is more than just blood. By Jesus' way of

thinking, true family is all those who seek God, the truest of human endeavors. It's another of his radical challenges to the powers that be. Open up the gates. Open up your arms. Recognize the enormous family you already have around you. Here you can find life and hope in the face of the oppression of the Romans.

The other story starts 25 years ago here in Mount Vernon. Jo Beecher, with a heart for justice, began working among migrant farm workers. Tom Worrell was there with her, along with others, (if I get the story wrong, Tom will correct me, please.) The time came when she was ordained priest and began gathering people at her office downtown.

Then the rector of St. Paul's invited the congregation to rent the building for their worship services and gave them a room to turn into an office. The rector has control of the building by canon, so he was in his rights, but it was done, as I have been told, rather unilaterally, and without garnering much community support. Like Jesus in Nazareth, there was pushback. I wasn't here, so I didn't hear the comments, but I can imagine them. "Who are these people?" "I wish I could understand them." "I wonder if they are talking about me." "Why don't they shush their noisy children?"

But life went on, and the congregation grew. At some point in time, they were invited to use the Nave and main altar for worship instead of the Fireside Room. Accommodations were made in the Sacristy for their Holy Hardware and linens. A young lady, coming up through the ranks, began to show promise as a leader.

Jo retired, and after a couple of less-than-ideal leadership, the congregation struggled through the Cluster years, with little pastoral care in Spanish. I was told by one of the main clergy in the Cluster that at one point he pulled the congregations away from one another because of the tensions that were growing and how they were being handled. Again, I was not here, I was not a witness, and I'm sure the resources were just not available to help the congregations manage the conflicts. but it seems to me like Mary, wanting to gather up Jesus and take him home, give him a good talking to, feed him a hot mother-made supper and tuck him safely into the soft, comforting bed of the status quo, all for everyone's good. Then another rector came who loved everybody in her own way. She managed St. Paul's as rector, and she learned to read the liturgy in Spanish, but could not preach or offer pastoral care in Spanish for Resurrección. The young lady's role emerged even more prominently, and she began attending the Iona School for Ministry.

When I came, I did not encounter the tensions to which my colleague referred. Instead, I found a St. Paul's who displayed a growing desire to get to know their renters better. I found a Resurrección who looked to St. Paul's for stability and security. I'm proud of you all for that! You obviously came a long way before I arrived, and since I have come, you've come a whole lot further. If you looked back now, you just may not really recognize yourselves. Ya done good! The commitment to intercultural interaction that I hear about is truly remarkable. Some strong friendships have been forged between people in both congregations, which brings me great

delight, and you are eager to hear from Resurrección, desiring to walk alongside them, accompany them and help them when it is appropriate. You make me proud.

So, things are moving again, bringing the question of who is family to the forefront. The truth is, they still rent from us. They are still our tenants, and so, the Canon to the Ordinary pitched it to me several months ago, echoing voices I had been hearing since I came, but resisted. Maybe it's time to make one family. Maybe it's time to redefine family, not in terms of what we have been in the past, but in terms of who is here among us following Jesus in our Episcopal way.

Now, this time it is NOT the rector's decision. A decision to join would be made independently by both the Vestry of St. Paul's and the Bishop's Committee of Resurrección and with the blessing of the bishop's office. A commitment on both sides has been expressed that this NOT be unilateral, but collaborative. If we are going to become family, all of us have a voice.

What would this new family look like? What would it feel like? Sound like? Smell like? I really don't know. One of the things I learned at the Nuevo Amanecer conference it's that every context is different and must be shaped by the people involved. There are, however, a couple of constants. First, in every situation where it is "working well enough," (and it's never perfect,) there is a strong commitment across the board to strive for equity of voice. Then, there is a strong commitment to learning to understand one another sufficiently that power can be shared. We can do that. We are already doing that. Again, I don't know what the final picture will look like; we'll work it out together.

Have you ever had the experience of having your family suddenly get bigger on you? Karisse had something like that when her widowed mother remarried a man with children of his own. Suddenly she had new brothers and sisters. For her they were never "step-siblings," they are just siblings. Maybe we are facing the same kind of thing. Last week I told you about a task force that has been put together. It includes Maggie Bird and Tony Smith from our Vestry, and Andrea Reyes and Delfino Salazar from Resurrección's Bishop's Committee. The five of us are planning a meeting to get started. Their task is to try to sketch out just how we might reflect Jesus' family more fully. Then they will recruit a couple of others from the congregations, to make a team of eight. They want to hear you, they want to speak with you, they want to include you in the process. When they have something ready, it will be presented to the two decision-making bodies independently. If it passes, then we will have a conversation with the bishop. Then we will plan a party, a party to celebrate the gathering of the new and greater family, the Episcopal branch of the Jesus' family here in Mount Vernon.