

He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother?

Romans 8:14-17

Saint Marks UMC, Charleston, WV Pentecost
(May 15) 2016

¹⁴ For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons^[a] of God. ¹⁵ For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” ¹⁶ The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, ¹⁷ and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.

Barney and Sue had a fifteen minute drive to the motel from the reception hall, following Barney's niece Sarah's wedding. As soon as they got into the car, Sue practically pounced on Barney about the people she had just encountered. She and Barney had not been married all that long themselves – although they were in their early 40's – and she had not remembered much from their own wedding.

Being the bride kind of puts blinders on you so that you don't really pay all that much attention to the guests – even if they are your new in-laws.

So this was her first real exposure to many of Barney's family.

“Holy cow! Who was the guy who mostly sat over in the corner and didn't say much? And was that an ankle bracelet he was wearing?”

“Oh, Ralph. Yeah, that was an ankle bracelet. He had to get special permission from his probation officer to leave his home confinement for this one night to allow him to see his niece get married.”

“House arrest? What did he do?”

“Ummm. I think it had something to do with insider trading. He used to be a stock broker.

But, if I'm not mistaken he will be free in another 6-7 months."

"What about the old lady, with all the jewelry, who kept dropping names all the time: where she vacations and whom she knows?"

"Oh, that's Aunt Jill. Yeah, she's always been like that – at least since her husband died. She's got all kinds of money but is not very happy. We always invite her because she needs to be with people who love her and whom she doesn't need to impress."

"Well, it's not working."

"That's alright. She's family."

"OK, but what about that crazy old guy with the cowboy hat. The one who kept acting like I'm your little sister, and who kept asking me

about when high school cheerleader camp was going to start.”

“Oh, him. That’s Uncle Marvin. He’s an old retired and crazy preacher. I think every family has an old crazy uncle whom everyone feels guilty for not inviting him to their home, but when we get around him at weddings and funerals, we remember why.

“But, I remember one time when I was a kid, and something happened so that Uncle Marvin was down on his luck. We all took turns keeping him in our home for a few months, until he got back on his feet. Crazy Uncle Marvin ... but he’s OUR crazy Uncle Marvin.”

“And the guy who was so angry?”

“Now THAT is Uncle Jarvis. He is always angry, because his life is lived out one crisis

after another. Some people are offensive; Uncle Jarvis is always **TAKING OFFENSE**. Don't know of a single time I have ever seen him when he's not been dumped on by somebody else."

How do you tolerate such stuff, Barney?

"Oh, they're just family. It's just who they are. You get used to it."

And on and on the discussion went that night until they turned off the lights, got under the covers, and kissed good-night.

"I'm glad we're not crazy like that, Barney. I must have married the only sane one in your whole family." Barney just smiled, as Sue wrapped her arms around her 38 year-old teddy bear, and drifted off to sleep.

In 1969, the musical group *The Hollies* (with Elton John playing the piano for this one song) released a song entitled *He Ain't Heavy; He's My Brother*. (Neal Diamond and *The Osmonds* also recorded the song.)

The lyrics go like this:

**The road is long
With many a winding turn
That leads us to who knows where,
Who knows when.
But I'm strong
Strong enough to carry him
He ain't heavy, he's my brother**

**So on we go
His welfare is of my concern
No burden is he to bear
We'll get there
For I know
He would not encumber me
He ain't heavy, he's my brother**

If I'm laden at all
I'm laden with sadness
That everyone's heart
Isn't filled with the gladness
Of love for one another

It's a long, long road
From which there is no return
While we're on the way to there
Why not share?
And the load
Doesn't weigh me down at all
He ain't heavy, he's my brother

He's my brother
He ain't heavy, he's my brother...

Many people thought that the song came from the slogan of Boys' Town, a children's home in the Midwest, founded by Father Edward Flanagan (and it was their slogan, with a picture of one small lad carrying another on his back.)

But the origin seems to go back further -- to an 1884 book, entitled *The Parables of Jesus*, by James Wells, Moderator of the United Free Church of Scotland. That book contains a parable about a **little girl** carrying a younger, but large, boy. Seeing her struggling, someone asked if she weren't tired. With surprise, she replied. ***“No, he not heavy, he's my brother.”***

Today is the celebration of Pentecost – when we usually read the scripture about the Holy Spirit coming down upon the disciples and others gathering in Jerusalem, and empowering them to speak in the language of everyone who was there. But it is also the celebration of the birth of the Church.

And sometimes, it seems like we forget about the Church component of Pentecost. And, instead, we limit the action of the Holy Spirit to just an individual “God-and-me” / ”I go to the garden alone” kind of experience.

But the birth of the Church takes us beyond just our individual need for God, and further than a mere one-on-one relationship with our best friend Jesus.

Turn with me to page 45 in your Red [UM] Hymnal, and let us read together the “Introduction to the Service of Baptism”:

The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God’s Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of

believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.

In this INSTITUTION – the Church – **We are family!**

One of the ways some are falling behind the 8-BALL in the Church (which by the way, is also one of the reasons why the Church has lost so much appeal and power in today's society) is that we have forgotten that we are **We are family!**

Or, as I posted on my Facebook page yesterday: **Church is about relationships, not requirements. It's not about being correct; it's about being connected.**

Sue didn't come from a close-knit family, like Barney had. She was more concerned about how

proper people were. For Barney, he saw how crazy some of his relatives were; but that's all right: they are family. Sue thought his family was all crazy, but saw nothing out of the ordinary for a 40 year-old woman to take her childhood teddy bear with her on a journey, to cuddle when she went to bed. Nothing out of the ordinary for her!

If you look at the history of the Chosen People in the First Testament (as one rabbi I know calls them: *“a bunch of people you'd never want your daughter to marry”*) to the goofy, scrapping, arguing, contentious disciples of the first generation of the Church – it's always been the same. They may be crazy; but they're my crazy. They ain't heavy, they're my brother.

Throughout Jesus' ministry, He did not make a litmus test of people having correct beliefs; He emphasized the relationship.

Somewhere along the line, some **Pharisees sneaked into the church**. And it happens all through history.

There are always some people who want to make it all about the rules; some people who always want to identify and label people who are “un-worthy.”

And one of the things that is always so amazing (Not!) is that these people making all the important rules and criteria somehow ***always come up with rules and regulations that cost them nothing***. The rules always affirm what they look like, and always make it so that somebody else has to change.

The rule-makers don't seem to get the "Family" notion at all...or, at least, draw the line very tightly on who gets to be in that Family.

Jesus was different. And so, too, the original church, whose birthday we celebrate today. Today's scripture tells us how we are ALL adopted into the same family as Jesus. With God as our Father, Jesus as our brother, children all our we. Let us walk with each other – in perfect harmony ... even when we don't agree.

When the Church lives together as a family, we love one another more than we love our ideas.

There's a **SECOND THING**, as well, that today's scripture reminds us. The Church, when it is lived as family, and is fueled by the Spirit (which birthed

the Church on Pentecost) **is not controlled by fear.**

It has been building for some time now. I have seen it coming during my life. We live increasingly in the language, the motivation, and the mindset of F E A R.

I dare you to go home and read your newspaper, watch your television news; look at FaceBook, listen to the politicians and not see it as the primary ingredient. **F-E-A-R ... F-E-A-R ... F-E-A-R.**

Today's scripture tells us that we have not received the Holy Spirit, just to fall back into the SLAVERY OF FEAR. Do you hear that: "SLAVERY of fear"?

Fear is a great short term early warning system. When you are afraid, something is

wrong. You need to find out what it is. (And sometimes the thing that is wrong, we will discover, is looking back in the mirror at us.)

But, if fear moves in and unpacks its bags and starts to live with you, everything will be wrong -- very, very wrong.

When fear moves in and unpacks its bags and starts to live with you, ***you are not living under the Freedom of God and the Power of the Holy Spirit.*** You are then living as a slave to something over which you have no control ... regardless of how many alarm systems, personal protection weapons, or persons voted for. When you live in the slavery of fear ... you will NOT ever feel safe.

- Fear debilitates.
- Fear feeds on itself.
- There is no escaping a culture of fear.

- Nothing will make us feel safe, regardless of what we do.
- There will always be something else to fear.

Love casts out fear. (1 John 4:18) And fear casts out love.

And, we have made a good start here at Saint Marks to reach out to people in love. But it's just a start.

We need to remember that we are family – even the ones that we might think are wacky doodle. (We usually fail to realize that WE are the “wacky doodle” ones in other folks’ eyes.) As we say in my family: “They may be crazy, but they are OUR crazies.” We love regardless of whether or not we agree.

And we also need to continue to step out in FAITH, not in FEAR. We need to continue to carry the message out the front door and into the streets: **At THIS Church, we worship not the God of Fear, but the God of Hope and the God of Promises Fulfilled, and the God of Second Chances.**

- **Now some people say that this is just nice “church talk” but it doesn’t really have anything to do with the “REAL WORLD.”**
- **And some people that say that the Church needs to keep its nose out of issues not involving the Church.**
- **Can you see how contradictory those statement are?**

One President of the US said some 70 + years ago, **“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself.”** Today, almost every politician seems to be saying, **“The only thing we can know for sure is fear itself.”**

And **we – the Church – need to spread the word: There is an alternative to the slavery of fear.** Come, come, let me show you a relationship where fear is not in control.

Today, we celebrate the birthday of the Church.

Do we still claim the faith of those early Christians –

- Where it was about relationship, not regulations?
- Where it was about freedom from fear, not slavery to it?

The church is of God, and will be preserved to the end of time, for the conduct of worship and the due administration of God's Word and Sacraments, the maintenance of Christian fellowship and discipline, the edification of believers, and the conversion of the world. All, of every age and station, stand in need of the means of grace which it alone supplies.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.