

# The Household of God: Practicing God's Economy

“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.”  
Ephesians 2: 19–22



When I first heard that the theme of this year's Access Packet was "God's Household," I spent time thinking about my own household—my family. I thought about what it means to be a person with disability in my family. Child of the twentieth century, I checked into what psychologists are saying about the characteristics of a healthy family. Before I started writing, I decided to see how the phrase "God's household" is used in scripture. (That's right, if all else fails, read the instructions.) I found the passage from Ephesians quoted above. As usual, scripture moved me beyond personal and cultural considerations.

In Greek, the word for household (*oikos*) is the root of the word "economy" (*oikonomia*). The economy of Paul's day was a network of households, groups of people joined together to create and manage resources. Each group (family, servants, slaves) had different duties, responsibilities and status. In the larger households, stewards saw to it that each person did her or his share so that the master's purposes might be achieved. The idea of a household and what it meant in terms of interdependence, acceptable conduct and responsibility was so strong that Paul borrowed it to illustrate the nature of the church. The household to which Paul called the early Christians, though, was revolutionary in his day and ours. God's economy differs from human economy.

**In God's economy, we are called to recognize (even celebrate) differences, but leave judgment to God.**

In the passage right before this one, Paul talks about the different—and divided—groups in his audience. Christ, he says, has come to create one new humanity in place of two, to bring peace and reconciliation, to bring different groups into one body. Paul used the body metaphor earlier, in his letter to Corinth (1 Corinthians 12:12-26), reminding us that, though we have different gifts and functions, we are one body, interdependent and equal. We humans—two thousand years ago and now—are quick to believe that, if one thing is different from another, one must

be *better* than the other. Difference in capabilities must mean difference in value. That is not, Paul tells us, God's way. In God's eyes ability—or lack of it—is not a measure of worth, not a predictor of success, not a limitation on contribution.

When my mother was middle-aged, she sometimes wore a button that said, "We are all aging." (Now that she is 84, she's switched to "aging ain't for sissies.") She was urging people to move away from us-versus-them thinking. I have been tempted to spend a day labeling everyone I meet with a sticker saying, "I am a person with disabilities."

Some of my disabilities are visible. You can see that I use a wheelchair and wear glasses. Some of my disabilities are harder to see. If you look closely, you can see I have fillings in my teeth. If you get to know me, you will discover that I have difficulty saying "no" to worthy requests. Some of my disabilities are completely hidden. Until this moment, only I knew that when I get a drink of water in the middle of the night, I have a compulsion to count the number of swallows. We are all disabled, some of us more visibly than others.

Part of our job, as members of the holy household, is to be mirrors for each other. A friend studying girls' development suggested that we work with twelve-year-old girls to "capture" who they are, through writing or creative projects, so that we can remind them of it as they navigate their treacherous teenage years. Reflecting and showing them evidence of their unique capabilities, they would stay stronger in the midst of messages to conform to unhealthy standards. As we work together in the household, we can notice and evince each other's skills and challenge each other to try something new. If differences are expected and not tied to value, taking risks becomes easier.

Our human limitations can require us to change the way we do things. The Americans with Disability Act brought us a useful idea: reasonable accommodation. In the context of that law, it means any modification or adjustment to a job or work environment that makes it possible for someone with a disability to enjoy equal opportunity. In my own life, it means cutting myself some slack when responding to my disability moves me away from what may be expected. I wear socks on my feet and dangly earrings in my ears because it's difficult for me to put on hose and studs. (Someone admiring my earrings complimented me on not being a slave to fashion. Luckily, God calls me to be faithful and loving, not to be fashionable!) In community, reasonable accommodation calls us to change physical and social structures so that they invite and enable full participation.

Just as we are all disabled, we are all glorious gifts from God, even when we can't see it in ourselves or in each other. Over and over in the gospels, I see Jesus reminding people of their worth and calling them away from their limitations towards community and service. I was proud of my church, last summer, when participants in our production of *Godspell* included someone who was blind, someone who uses a wheelchair, and someone who has Down syndrome. Each of these actors was a visible affirmation of God's call to move beyond what is easy or expected. (My guess is each participant, including those without visible disabilities, gave and received more than he or she expected.)

Our differences are to be recognized, accommodated, and celebrated and our value is without question.

## **In God's economy, we are called to committed relationships with each other.**

Paul's metaphors of body and temple put us into an alliance of absolute interdependence with each other. We are bonded together. We cannot survive as individuals but, as a community, we thrive. This idea of interdependence is rare in our culture, and is even more unusual when we think about people with disabilities. Too often, we imagine that we are either an independent I-can-handle-anything go-getter, or a delicate I-need-help-to-do-everything person. We think we are either servants who give unselfishly to the church and others or recipients of others' generosity. Paul reminds us that we each depend on each other *and* we each support each other.

Recognizing differences is not always comfortable. Differences, even when valued, can lead to what one description of healthy families calls "lively, even heated, discussions." One church of which I was a part was wrestling with how to use its building. Some members thought the daycare, which had been started as a mission and outreach project and had exclusive use of most of the church's facilities, should cease to be subsidized and, instead, begin paying market rates for rental of the church's space. Other members saw this as an abandonment of intent and surrender to greed. Discussions were lively and heated. It was not an easy time. I thought about looking for another church.

At the same time, my first grade daughter and her friend were learning how to be in relationship with each other. They would abandon a play session to bring the conflict to me. "Carly's not my friend anymore. She's being mean." Each would tell me her story. "Do you want to be friends?" I would ask them. They would glance at each other and nod. Reaffirming their commitment to each other, they would move past the conflict of the moment and find a way to play together again.

As the girls learned about friendship, they taught me about church community. I began to realize what a gift my church was experiencing. Hurtful words, spoken in the heat of the moment, were followed by apologies, forgiveness, and rededication to working together. We were recognizing our interdependence. We were proclaiming our commitment to each other.

## **In God's economy, we are called to create God's Kingdom on earth.**

During his ministry, Jesus did not just tell us to take care of the weak and the sinners; he spent time with them. They were included among his followers. He moved in company with them. Discussion is quieter when only those of us who think alike are at the table. The disability rights movement has a slogan, "Nothing About Us Without Us," that our church polity (a word I didn't know until I became a Presbyterian, by the way) might do well to remember. It means we don't make decisions *about* people; we make decisions *with* people. Each of us is a stakeholder in the Kingdom of God. Each of us is included, even when we are not quiet about our differences.

Many of you have seen pictures of Edward Hick's painting, *A Peaceable Kingdom*. Based on a verse from Isaiah, it shows lions and lambs, tigers and rabbits, lying near each other in a beautiful wood. Children sit and play amongst them. Hicks worked in the early 1800's. He made money as a sign painter to support his ministry as a Quaker preacher and painted over a hundred versions of this scene. In some of them, he painted Native Americans and settlers making peace in the background. He was meditating on the Kingdom of God. Different creatures and different cultures—magnificent in their differences—joined together.

We are to make our household a temple...a dwelling place for God. A community where differences are recognized, accommodated, and celebrated, a group where each member is understood to be a gift beyond measure, a family where mistakes are admitted and forgiven and where commitment to each other is absolute...it sounds like paradise to me. This is the economy to which we are called as followers of Christ.

Ask yourself:

- ~ How do I sometimes think of differences as limitations on worth?
- ~ What are my disabilities?
- ~ What accommodations do I need to make for them?
- ~ Have I told those in the church about my needs?
- ~ How can I be a better mirror to those around me, recognizing and naming their talents?
- ~ Do I encourage others to try new things? Do I try new things?
- ~ How do I give and receive? With which am I more comfortable?  
What one thing could I do to bring more balance between the two?
- ~ Is there someone with whom I am in conflict? What differences are there between us?  
How are they giving to the community? What conversations could we have?  
Can we commit to relationship with each other?
- ~ Are there factions within our church? What differences are at their core?  
What issues are at their core? What does the Bible have to say about those issues?  
What discussions can we have with each other? How can we commit to God's household?
- ~ Is our church polity designed to include all stakeholders?
- ~ What one action could I take right now in my life to better create God's Kingdom on earth?

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