

Homily January 1, 2024 Mary, Mother of God / Holy Family © Teresa Elder Hanlon
CCL¹: Numbers 6: 22-27; Ephesians 2:11-19, 22; Mark 3:19b-22, 31-35 FNV of NT

When I was growing up, one of six children with my parents and numerous household pets, many times over the years, our family welcomed strangers as billets. They were dancers, musicians and actors who came to this little rural town for what was called the “Overture Series”. We didn’t have a guest room. To make room, we children gave up our beds and camped out on the living room floor in sleeping bags. This seed of hospitality, of letting others make our home their home, grew in me.

When I was 17, I left home to go to a college for grade 12 and the start of university. At Christmas, I got permission to bring home three friends from Asia. I couldn’t bear the thought of them left alone in the dormitory for that time between Christmas and New Years when the College offices and kitchen shut down. For the rest of my parents’ lives these three women adopted my father and mother as “Papa Moose” and “Mama Moose.”

This pattern of welcoming people into our family for shorter and longer periods of time has continued through the years for myself and my husband. Physicians in town working temporarily, a man released from jail on parole, children of a single mom sharing our space as their space. Most recently, we’ve opened our home to be church for gathering and worship.

And we ourselves have been welcomed as a family by a family on a nearby reserve and in homes in Hong Kong, Indonesia, Kenya, south India, Germany, Italy, New Zealand and England. Today, I am closer to many of these people than I am to my own brothers and sister. We love each other with a loyalty and an understanding that is free from the expectations and obligations of a family of origin of how to behave. They are relationships prompted by the Spirit. Whether short term or long term, these people are holy family members for me.

Jesus, in Mark’s gospel, sets himself free from the demands of those brothers and sisters with his mom outside the crowded house, but also, John J. Pilch, cultural historian, reminds us, he cuts himself off here from the safety of his family’s social network. Family in the Mediterranean “embedded its members in an extensive economic, religious, educational, and social network. Any form of removal from the family meant a loss of connection to these life-giving networks and loss of connection to ancestral land.”² Jesus’ announcement, in the story, to adopt his listeners and followers as family in this home away from Nazareth is, Pilch says “social suicide.”

He risks. In terms of his relationship with mother, his words jeopardize “the closest emotional bond in this culture [which] exists between mother and eldest son.”³ Pilch also comments that a daughter-in-law is proven worthy by bearing a son. So what is the teaching here?

Jesus, *Creator Sets Free* best identifies as family, at this point in his life, those “who walk in the ways of the Great Spirit”. Those who know who they are and act accordingly. The energy in his statement is one of risk born of love.

¹ CCL: Comprehensive Catholic Lectionary

² John J. Pilch, *Cultural Tools for Interpreting the Good News*, (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 46.

³ *Ibid.*, 21.

A family in this culture could declare a member “out of his mind” and rescue them from the shame of those who accuse Jesus of being a disciple of evil (Pilch). Jesus’ words here, however, undo that possibility by shifting the definition of family in his life. Everyone in that packed room is deserving of his love and commitment. He will not be limited to the security of his natural family. Rather, he’s willing to risk identifying with those who hear his teaching and follow. Many of them, too, have left behind their social network.

We know from references to Mary in the Acts of the Apostles, that she continued in his circle as one of those “who walked in the ways of the Great Spirit.” In the first centuries of the CE, she carried the title “Mother of God” in Ephesus. Apparitions of Mary reveal her love for the outcast, the maltreated and those subjected to the brutality of war.

Mark (*War Club*) tells of a Jesus who is closer to those who connect with his broader concept of family and his message of “Love over Law.” Whether defending his followers who pick grain to eat on the Sabbath because they are hungry or when he invites the man with the withered hand in the synagogue to rise and stretch it out for healing on the Sabbath, Jesus makes the point that he’s willing to “Hold nothing back. To learn to find ease with risk.” (John O’Donohue in his blessing, “For A New Beginning.”)

If there is hope for change in this world fraught with pain, it is, Jane Goodall says, in the “indominable human spirit.” That spirit is in evidence in this risk Jesus takes. And Goodall also sees hope in “the resilience of nature” which, if we understand Indigenous teaching of relationship with plants and animals, these aspects of Creation also reveal what it means to be true in the sense of “walking in the ways of the Great Spirit.”

Can we live this attitude of welcoming the stranger, of expanding the boundaries of family love and obligations to include others whose lives somehow collide with our own, including the lives of the natural world?

In the second reading the risen Christ, the Chosen One’s body is compared to the lodge poles of tipis. I read on the internet that for the Blackfoot, the 18 poles are pathways of prayer. For some Cree nations the poles of the Tipi represent the nations of peoples living upon Mother Earth, all Nations fitting into the circle which is infinite. There are 13 poles in a Cree tipi and they also represent traits to be honoured, starting with the three anchor poles that signify respect, obedience and humility. As the letter to the Ephesians says:

“Because of him, we both have a clear path through one Spirit, to the Holy One from above. Now we are all his holy people and members of one new nation. No one is on the outside of this great family that Holy Sophia is creating. We are all related to one another and initiated into Creator’s lodge that is built together with wooden poles. Joined together in this way, we become a dwelling place for the Chosen One’s Spirit.”

Our Communion song today is in Cree, *Notawe* which translates, My Father, or My Creator. Adrian Sutherland, Attawapiskat composer, says of the song “It’s about finding the will to move on and live life on your own after your parents have passed, no matter how hard things get.” We are invited today, to be holy family together and to recognize the power of the feminine spirit in Mary

to endure in welcoming as family all life true to themselves whether tree, to fish, bird, mammal or human being.

Breakout room questions: 1. Who are you being invited to welcome into your life? 2. What gifts of yourself do you offer to your family / community / the world in this New Year?

Notawe (Father) – pronounced Noh-TUH-wee – is the first single from Adrian Sutherland’s upcoming second solo album (March 2024).

The song was written and performed entirely in Omushkegowuk Cree and pays homage to Indigenous culture and language. “Notawe is one of two all-Cree songs on my new album, which is something I’m exploring for the first time,” says Sutherland, who wanted to write a song that would be extra meaningful for the Cree people of James Bay – and beyond. “Notawe means ‘my father’ in my language, and can also mean ‘my Creator’. It’s a song about fathers who have departed to the spirit world, but it’s not so much about the grieving process. It’s about finding the will to move on and live life on your own after your parents have passed, no matter how hard things get. It turned out to be a beautiful song, and I’m proud that it’s in Cree. When I play it back now it inspires me, and I hope others will find it inspiring, too.”