

[BLANK] [PRAYER] It's good to be back, and great to be with my faith family again, as we grow in God's grace. We are a church that tries to be a family of faith, which is not the easiest thing to do. Families take commitment. Families will have their differences. Families will have members who don't always follow the program, or who see things differently than the rest of the family.

As I supported my wife through the burials of both of her parents these past two weeks, I got a reminder from June-Ann's huge extended family just how true this can be. Relatives from mostly Italian and Irish families, who grew up in the south end of Boston, all had their own different view of the world, and where they fit into it. It takes a lot to hold a family together, even for one family in one place.

It's hard for families to scale. Researchers who look at ancient human civilizations have seen a pattern: Most tribes of early humans rarely grew beyond 150 people. This pattern seems to stick because beyond that size, people don't have a strong sense of being blood relatives one way or another. It wasn't until new ways of doing things came along, like writing, money, and food storage, that human civilization began to scale beyond the small tribes of humans who banded together for thousands of years.

Now the idea of global scale seems to dominate almost everything that we see and do. Like it or not, we are a family-scaled church in a world that's scaled way beyond the size of a typical family. Mom and pop stores? Not too many of those are left, and we're grateful for the ones that remain. So it can be with churches, too. There are huge churches in many places, and they may have their own advantages, but they will always lack the touch of people in a community who make that community more like a Christian family than just a place to live. Being like a big family in the image of Christ matters. Our God is known as Father, Son, and Spirit, and we are known as Christ's brothers and sisters. To be like Christ is to be like God's image of a perfect extended family.

But what is a perfect family in the imperfect world that we live in? And how do we grow it? It's not easy in a world of fast food and fast faith to offer people the slow, deliberate approach to faith that offers the deepest and longest lasting approach to Christian living that God offered to us in Jesus. And we are challenged by our faith to spread the good news of Jesus Christ, in word and in deed, everywhere. In today's reading from Mark's gospel, we can see that Jesus offers us another way to grow the church that is different from our modern ideas of scale.

We can see in today's reading that Jesus starts out his ministries family-sized, in the home of Simon, who Jesus would later name Peter, the first leader of his disciples. Simon's mother was sick with a fever, and Jesus came to her home to heal her. As soon as the fever left Simon's mother, she got up and began to serve Jesus. Jesus, not even a relative of Simon, began to get treated by Simon's mother like he was right at home, one of their own! Faith always starts with how we treat our loved ones in everyday living. If we don't walk the talk of Jesus with our own relatives, we'll have a hard time doing it with others.

The word got out about Jesus' miracles very quickly. Before you know it, people were coming from all over to be healed by Jesus. And Jesus welcomed them all in, and

invited as many as he could for the family touch of God's healing. Did all of these people become disciples of Jesus? I doubt it. Most had desperate needs, and were glad to be touched by the healing hand of Jesus. Could all of the disciples of Jesus teach all of these people how to become disciples? In a perfect world, maybe, but probably not.

We see in Mark's gospel that Jesus had to think about what had happened for a while. He went off to a quiet place to pray. When he came back, Jesus told his disciples that he had decided to take a new approach to his ministries. He wanted to take another way to spread the good news of God's kingdom on earth. He wanted to spread the good news in other towns, because, as Jesus put it, "This is what I was meant to do."

It was probably the most important turning point in the ministries of Jesus. It was one thing to be a local hero, a local healer and preacher who people would visit from all around to get what they wanted - healing, and hope. But it would be a very different thing to create a system of local heroes around the world, a system of family bonds with God, in the image of Christ, that could conquer the world for God's kingdom. Making a perfect family of God in one place would never do for Jesus. Jesus knew that none of us would ever be perfect for more than fleeting moments in our lives, and our families of faith would be no more perfect. What was important for Jesus was to offer as many people as possible the perfect image of God in Christ, and to help people spread the family of God in Christ one person, one group, one community at a time.

In 1953, two brothers, Richard and Maurice McDonald, re-opened their renovated hamburger stand in Monrovia, California. Like Jesus, they had a system in mind, a better system, they thought, to make good food for everyday families. Like Jesus in Mark's gospel, they thought that they could spread their other way of doing things to others. The few franchises that they set up on their own did OK, but the franchises didn't follow the brothers' formula for success. They struggled, and, eventually, the franchises closed. It wasn't until Ray Kroc, a milkshake machine salesman, bought the rights to the McDonald's franchise for a nationwide chain, that their franchising took off. But by then, it wasn't the family restaurant that the McDonald brothers had started up. It was huge, it was popular, just as Jesus was so popular in Simon's home town, but it was... different. It wasn't really a restaurant that gave back to the communities that they set up business in the way that a family owned restaurant should give back. They took, more than they gave.

In the months and years ahead, I think that you can expect this church to grow. It won't be because of me, but because we will work together to create a strong system of faith development, based on our powerful Methodist traditions, that will spread from one family to another, from one changing life to another, until we are touching more lives for Christ than ever before. There will be plenty of other churches trying to do the same, to be sure. And there will be some who may doubt that we are the real deal, real Christians who are trying to bring God's love in a real and trustworthy way to the world.

And that will be OK. Because, as Jesus taught us, the way to build and spread faith is not about churning out Christians like hamburgers, and it's not about making people Christians exactly the way that you want them to be in just a few places. In real

Christianity, there is no packaging, no artificial ingredients and preservatives. Real Christianity is served up family style, sometimes with a mess, sometimes with a reach across the table, often with new friends around the table who become like family, and always with an invitation from God to spread God's family love everywhere, to make new families, often in places where we've never been before. And in each place that we touch, through our faith in Jesus Christ, we will offer the world more than we received, and we will receive in Christ more than we offered. We will become God's family first and foremost, together, a day at a time.

There is another way to grow a church. It's the United Methodist way, a way that connects us to a global community of faith that grows churches the old fashioned way, one community, one group, one complicated, extended, multicultural family at a time, until we're all connected in the trust and love and healing and hope that is a world becoming like God's family, disciples learning how to make disciples, for generations to come. Jesus showed us that there is another way. Let's make this church a vibrant community of faith that is getting ready to grow faith families in the Methodist tradition here, and everywhere, in the way of Christ. Amen.