

[BLANK] [PRAYER] He is risen! He is risen indeed! With a few more daffodils, tulips, and forsythias blooming this week, we can believe that a bit more easily, can't we? Perhaps our slow spring is a good thing for people of faith. When the weather is warm, it's easy for Easter joy to come and go, and fade, like the petals of a tulip on a hot day. But this year's weather encourages us to make the transition into warm Easter sunlight bit by bit. There's no reason to let go of Easter quickly. It took many years for the first Christians to make sense of it, and there's no reason that we shouldn't take our time making sense of it, either.

This week we heard Luke's story of the resurrection of Jesus. It fits with the other gospel stories of Jesus rising from the dead, but Luke's version focuses on the very personal nature of Jesus meeting his disciples after his resurrection. Jesus has conversations with them on the road to Emmaus. Jesus sits down and eats bread and fish with them. And, most of all, Luke refers to the disciples of Jesus as a group again and again - "they." For Luke, the resurrection is a personal encounter with Jesus as God that a whole community of believers experiences, together.

Often I hear people saying that faith is a personal matter. In our modern sense, this seems to mean that faith is a private and individual matter, something that we can claim as individual belief, and not be bothered with having to connect it to other people's beliefs. [SMALL PIZZA] Perhaps we think of faith like a "personal pan pizza," made up of the same ingredients of other people's pizzas, but made just the way we like it, with just enough to satisfy our own appetite. The problem is, as Christians, we seek faith in a God whose idea of "personal" is not at all like our modern sense of "personal." [BLANK] The God revealed to Adam and Eve, the God revealed to Abraham, the God revealed to Moses, the God revealed to the prophets of Israel, the God revealed to the world as Jesus, the Christ, the God revealed to all people for all time in God's Holy Spirit, this God is absolutely personal, but absolutely not individual. God is family, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and God calls to us in God's Holy Spirit to become members of God's family: children of God.

Words like "family," "children," "Father," and "Son," can be comforting and strong images for many people when they think of their relationship with God. They might remind us of the best parts of our own families, or at least the best parts of families that we wanted to have, like those who we saw on TV shows growing up. But our families aren't perfect. Some of our families are far from perfect. Abusive parents, siblings, and relatives, family members who just don't seem to grow up, family members absorbed in personal satisfaction, family members trying to find an authentic identity that contrasts with their family's identity, and family members who just have a hard time coping - all of these, and more, remind us that to be called into God's family by the risen Jesus, in God's Holy Spirit, can be a major challenge for us today. With God, it's personal, and personal relationships in a family are challenging.

I wrote a special translation for our reading from our 1 John 3 readings in the New Testament. I did this to help us hear what it says with words that are more in tune with our modern ears. In the original languages of the Bible, most things in the world, including things that were not alive, were either male or female. Things that didn't have gender were often groups, like children, or places where groups gathered, like temples. Strictly speaking, everything was personal - either something was, or was for, a male, or a female, or everyone.

When it comes to talking about God, then, God had gender, not necessarily because God was supposed to be a man, but because God was personal, and had persons: the

Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This reflects how households in the time of Jesus were organized typically. Most property was owned by men, even though women ruled their households in many ways.

In today's world, of course, many households are not organized this way. In our nation, women are as free to own property as men, and many households are organized around women, with many women responsible for their children in the absence of their fathers. Does this mean that the God revealed in Jesus Christ does not invite these families into the kingdom of heaven? Of course not. But it does mean that we need to work a bit harder to understand who we are, and who others are, as children of God.

The writer of 1 John 3 said, "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God." In a world where blood relationships determined your life, in a world in which a fatherless family was often a family without the means to survive, this sense of being included in God's family by the love of God was a huge, huge, deal. Anyone who felt that God had shut them out, because of family failures, had a chance to be a member of God's family on earth.

[TRANSLATION] 1 John 3 reflects the personal relationships that God calls us to in Jesus, and not the genders of those relationships. Our special translation shows us that being a child of God is about one important thing: God's love. The special translation replaces the "he's" with "God." You can see how this relationship with God isn't about God as a male head of household, or about the inheriting male. It's all about God's personal family love, given to us through faith in Jesus Christ. [BLANK]

If we have a strong sense of love from our own father, a sense of protection and provision, then this image probably reassures us. If we didn't experience fatherly protection growing up, or even now, then this image might be harder for us to accept. Sometimes fathers struggle to show love to their families the way that God shows love. Our worldly fathers can't always be like God, any more than our worldly mothers can always be like God. Our parents do the best they can with what they have. And, as adults, we discover that, although we are adults, we are still children of our parents, and brothers and sisters of our siblings. Time, and circumstances, cannot erase these relationships. They are what they are. But we can become who God wants us to be, as members of God's family.

I don't think that any of our situations with families were unknown to Jesus. If we look at the gospels, Jesus is caring constantly for broken families, families with challenges, families with illnesses, and, very often, people completely forgotten by their families. And so we should take comfort that Jesus was the very first one to offer us the image of God as the best family that we could ever have

In the words and life of Jesus, God wanted to offer the world a new relationship with God that would not leave anyone out of God's family. God the Son, Jesus Christ, did not come to us in fine clothes and jewelry, the typical signs of a son who would inherit his father's fortune. God came to us in Jesus Christ as the most humble of people, taking nothing but daily bread, giving everything that he could, including his own life, to make sure that the whole world would be inheritors of God's kingdom. Jesus revealed his full glory to us only when it was available to all of us, as the risen Jesus. In the risen Jesus, God's love became personal, for everyone, forever.

We have a God whose love we can trust, absolutely and personally, because God has given us everything in love, even God's own life on a cross, absolutely, and personally. And this personal love for us calls us, through our risen Christ, not into individual salvation, but into the personal salvation of God's family, a family defined by perfect love. We have a God who created everything in love. We have a God who breaks his body as

bread with us in love. And we have a God who offers us our inheritance of God's love, again and again, in God's Holy Spirit.

It is this perfect and pure family love that is called God's righteousness. We are called to love God and the world, and even ourselves, as the risen Jesus has in perfect family love, as the only true test of whether we have been right or not. When we give and receive this family love, and this love alone, to the whole world, undeceived by the world's temptations, we receive the riches of peace, and safety, and comfort, that God has prepared for us, even us, personally, in Christ. You matter personally to God. You always will. Because with God, it's personal, and it always will be, for children of God's family, in Christ. Accept God's family love, and offer it to your own family, and to the world, now, and forever. Amen.