

## *All in the Family*

*Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-14*

Rev. Gobledale, July 26 2009, Kirkland Congregational Church UCC

Pray with me. May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts, be acceptable to you, God, Yahweh, Allah, the foundation of all nations and all people.

Ishmael: I have seen a miracle! A multiplication of loaves and fishes so that all may be fed. A miracle, I tell you... And yet, it was not a miracle.

What is that? Who am I? What am I doing here today? Call me Ishmael, son of La-din'. Yes, yes at home I am called Ishmael bin La-din'. I come from beyond the city of Damascus. My home sits on the banks of the Euphrates River. But I have relatives in this part of the world. Their home snuggles in the heights of Golan, overlooking the lake, Tiberius. I think you know it as the Sea of Galilee.

My family traces its roots to Hagar and Ibrahim. Ibrahim is known in some parts of the world as Abraham. I am the namesake of Ibrahim and Hagar's son, Ishmael, but they all lived long, long ago.

But I digress. I travel from the Euphrates River valley to the Golan Heights for trading. I bring cinnamon, cumin and cardamon. And I return home with silver, some gold and very good olive oil.

What? Oh yes! The miracle, yet not a miracle. I and my sisters and brothers in the Golan,... they are not my real sisters and brothers, but in my culture we call them sisters and brothers. We all have the same family origins. Therefore we are all in the family. My sisters, brothers and I, we hear of commotions across the lake. Another teacher, another prophet has emerged from twelve tribes of Judah called Israel.

You know, all peoples are distinct, separate from one another. But those Israelites, they *really* set themselves apart with their customs, their commandments, their kosher eating. They break bread only with their own kind. Even then, the strictest amongst them will break bread with their sisters and brothers only if they are ritually clean. If you are not clean, forget receiving food from a kosher, clean Israelite.

Well, another prophet arises amongst the Israelites across the lake. This season they celebrate their passover festival. This prophet brings new teachings. He delivers powerful healings, I hear. He says, "Sins are forgiven!" Some people love him. Other people loathe him.

Traveling the long distance from the Euphrates to this region of the Decapolis, I have seen many things. Of this new prophet across the lake, I think, "Stay on your own side. We do not need you here." Hah, but he crosses over. A crowd from Galilee follows him, some in boats, others on foot around the southern end of the lake. Added to that mob come people from our side of the lake, from the hills of Golan, from the towns of Caesarea Philippi, from Hippos. Jews, Greeks, Romans, Samaritans, even Ishmaelites like me gather to see him. Such a crowd, even in Damascus I have never seen.

His teachings disturb me. They differ from traditional teachings. He says, "The first shall be last." He says, "The peace makers are blessed." He says, "Not an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, but rather, turn the other cheek!" He says, "Before you make

an offering to God, be sure things are right between you and your sister, your brother, even the stranger in your midst!” What does all this mean?

But now, late afternoon arrives. The sun, sparkling on the lake waters, dips low in the West. We in crowd gather on Golan's hills a long way from anywhere. Children whine with the hunger which gnaws at their bellies.

I hear the teacher-- his friends call him “rabbi.” I hear the rabbi ask, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?”

Hah! What an outrageous question! First, there is no place nearby to purchase bread. Second, if there were, they would need six months wages to buy enough bread to feed us all. We are legions on that hillside.

Now, the crowd mills around like sheep without a shepherd. We want our daily bread, but we do not want to leave the presence of the prophet, the rabbi. I see some bread loaves and a couple of fish come from a lad's bag. “Ah,” I think, “They will have their meal.” But then...but then... the unexpected happens. First we are told to sit. Out of our chaotic mingling we sort ourselves into groups: families and friends together, yes, but strangers nearby, too. The rabbi lifts the loaves and blesses them. He breaks them and says, “Take and eat.” And with the fish, he does the same thing.

Now, I know Israelite people expect their prophets and rabbis to be ritually pure people. As I said, they do not break bread and eat with just anyone. Of course, none of us has had a chance to wash, prepare and purify ourselves. But that does not stop him. Five loaves and two fish pass from the rabbi and his disciples into the crowd. We are many thousand hungry souls. And all are fed. No one leaves with hunger biting at their belly.

The miracle that is not a miracle—how did he do it? How did he feed those five thousand people? What happened that afternoon? I leave you to decide.

For me I have seen a miracle, a very big miracle...a prophet, rabbi, from across the lake who not only teaches the abundant love of God, but shows it. You remember what I said. Gathered on that hillside, we are Jew and gentile, Greek and Roman, Samaritans and Ishmaelites and God knows who else. And the rabbi tells us all to sit **together**. This rabbi, a stranger to many of us, blesses the food and passes it to us. Then, hand to hand, we take what we need and pass it on, one to another.

How amazing! That rabbi, from one of the most exclusive of cultures, reaches out to *all*, all of us. There was no test of faith. There was no creed commanded of us. No one was excluded by colour or culture, by age or youth, by purity or impurity. No matter where we were on our journey, no matter who we were, we were welcomed at that table on that hillside, all sisters and brothers, all in the family.

I have seen a miracle!

Let us pray. God, the originator of all families, the originator of each person, you name us as your family. Help us heed the teaching of Jesus, that day on the shores of Lake Tiberius. Empower us to follow his example, accepting responsibility for ensuring that needs are met for all people, for all our sisters and brothers, near and far. Prod us when we worry there is not enough, to share that all may be satisfied. Thank you for the miracle of your abundant love. Amen.