

**“HOME FOLKS”**  
**Acts 10:44-48; 1 John 5:1-6; John 15:9-17**  
**A Sermon by John Thomason**  
**Woodbury UMC**  
**May 9, 2021**

Mother’s Day is celebrated by nearly all Americans; it’s as much a part of our national fabric as red, white, and blue bunting. What you may not know is that Mother’s Day has unique ties to Methodism. It began in its present form with a special service in 1907 at the Methodist Episcopal Church in Grafton, West Virginia. The service was organized by a Methodist laywoman named Anna Jarvis to honor her own mother who had died two years earlier.

Soon, Anna Jarvis was advocating that all mothers be honored on the second Sunday in May. The entire Methodist denomination adopted this practice in 1912, and then raised it to the national agenda. Two years later, President Woodrow Wilson signed a proclamation declaring the second Sunday in May to be a national holiday honoring all mothers. This is how America got Mother’s Day, and it’s gratifying to know that Methodists played a big part in its development.

But the story doesn’t end there. Sometime later, the United Methodist Church placed Mother’s Day in a larger context, designating the second Sunday in May to celebrate Christian family life as a whole. On this occasion, Methodists observe not only Mother’s Day, but what we call the “Festival of the Christian Home” – and what better way to celebrate the Christian home than with the baptism of children.

We all recognize the distinction between a house and a home. One is made of brick and mortar; the other is made of flesh and blood. What makes a house a home is the people who live in it. And so today, we are here to honor “home folks” – our mothers in particular, who gave us birth and nurture; but also, other family members who have loved us and mentored us, who rooted us in the Christian faith and have continued to help us grow, personally and spiritually.

In our common vernacular, the term “home folks” refers not only to people in our immediate family, but to people in our home locality. When I was in Pennsylvania last week, I ran into a middle-aged couple in the lobby of my hotel. Lo and behold, they were both wearing UConn sweatshirts. I made a beeline to them and we struck up an animated conversation about Husky basketball. They became my instant friends in a foreign land because they were “home folks”!

“Home folks” are also what we call people with whom we feel a certain kinship and camaraderie, people with whom we feel “at home,” even if their lineage and location are different from ours. You and I naturally gravitate to people who are similar to us. “Birds of a feather flock together,” we say.

As the clock ticks toward my departure from Woodbury, I’ve been thinking a lot about my first impressions of this church when I came here eight years ago. You were a congregation of total strangers to me, speaking to me, a drawling Southerner, in a Yankee accent! But I knew in an instant that you were “home folks” – people with whom I shared similar values and aspirations. It’s no wonder that Christians often refer to the congregation to which they belong as their “church home.” What this term suggests is that we experience the people in our faith community as “home

folks.” We share a personal and spiritual rapport, a common tradition and language of faith, a similar way of being Christian.

You and I know almost instinctively who the “home folks” are in our lives; conversely, we know who they are not. We all encounter individuals and groups with whom we have little in common, whose appearance or lifestyle or belief system are not only different but in direct conflict with ours. Perhaps it is someone with a punk rock hairdo, or someone who holds the hand of a person of the same gender in public, or a group of protesters who carry signs representing the opposite side of the political spectrum from ours, or a neighboring church that believes and worships in a manner that rubs us the wrong way. We may not write them off as terrible people, but they are not “our kind of folks,” folks with whom we feel at home.

Today’s three Scripture lessons prompt us to ask some soul-searching questions. First, beyond our own blood relatives, whom do you and I regard as “home folks”? More importantly, whom does God regard as “home folks”? Then the toughest question of all: how does God expect Christians to relate to those who are not “home folks” to us?

Our starting point, as always, is with God – not the pint-sized, provincial God we tend to fashion in our own image, but the God of all creation and, above all, the God who is fully revealed in Jesus Christ. To cut to the chase: if we want to know the mind of God, we must search the mind of Jesus. What does Jesus have to say about “home folks” – about who they are or who they should be?

Well, in myriad ways throughout the Gospels, Jesus affirms that God views all people as children of God, regardless of nationality or race or creed. The God whom Jesus calls “Father” regards every human being as a member of God’s family – as a son or a daughter, not as a stranger or a scoundrel. As another preacher aptly put it, “God has no enemies; all God has are rebellious children.” No matter how peculiar or perverse we are, we are all “home folks” to God.

As the divine wrapped in human flesh, Jesus embodies God’s loving embrace of all people. What’s more, Jesus makes his embrace specific and personal in his relationship with the Church. In his Farewell Discourse to his disciples, Jesus makes an extraordinary claim: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you” (John 15:15-16a).

To be honest with you, I find these words to be almost unbelievable. In our “upstairs, downstairs” world, I see Christ living upstairs and myself living downstairs. I’m only a distant acquaintance of Christ, not his intimate companion. I’m only an employee in his business, not his full partner. I imagine many of you feel the same way. Who among us would be presumptuous enough to see ourselves as anything more than servants of our master, Jesus Christ? But here Christ says that he does not view us as outsiders or underlings. He has adopted us as members of his family, as his colleagues in ministry. To borrow a term from today’s social media, Christ has “friended” us. He regards us not as second-class citizens or strangers, but as “home folks.”

At the same time, Christ retains the authority of a master, even with his friends. He doesn’t just ask them nicely, he commands his friends to treat others as he and his Father have treated us. Christ regards us as home folks; but he also commands us to regard other people as “home folks,” even those with whom we do not feel at home.

Today's Scripture lessons indicate that this is a hard teaching for the early Church to digest. The Book of Acts starts out at a time when all followers of Jesus are Jewish. It's easy to tell who the "home folks" are: they are those who profess faith in Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, but who also continue to adhere to the strict laws of Judaism. At this point, Gentiles do not qualify for church membership. The rules are simple and clear: no circumcision, no baptism; no kosher diet, no Holy Communion.

Then a Roman centurion named Cornelius is converted to Christ and baptized. Other Gentiles see what has happened, hear the gospel Peter preaches, and believe for themselves. They are anointed by the Holy Spirit and start praising God in ecstatic speech. This prompts Peter to ask, "Can anyone withhold the water for baptizing these people who have received the Holy Spirit just as we have?" (Acts 10:47). The other Jewish Christians may still be skeptical, but Peter "orders" these Gentiles "to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ" (v. 48). In the twinkling of an eye, Gentiles become "home folks," not by a bond of blood but by water and the Spirit. The remainder of the Book of Acts is the story of how the Church continues to expand into Gentile territory and receive non-Jewish converts.

By the time John writes his Gospel toward the end of the first century, the Church is a motley crew of mixed races and nations, of people who are conventionally religious and people whose backgrounds are purely pagan. John frames the Farewell Discourse as the parting words of the earthly Jesus to his disciples, but they are also the words of the risen Christ to the Church decades later, and to our church today. His words may sound smooth and soothing, but they are actually tough and demanding. According to Christ, we demonstrate our spiritual commitment not by what we profess with our lips in doctrine and prayer and praise. No, Christ says that we truly love God and abide in him only as we keep his commandments. And "this is my commandment," he says, "that you love one another as I have loved you" (John 15:12).

Christ's commandment sounds so simple and obvious; but what does it really mean for Christ's followers to "love one another"? Does it mean exchanging warm fuzzies during the worship service? Does it mean "peace at any price" during church committee meetings? Does it mean that there are no acknowledged differences, no serious disagreements, just hugs and kisses all around?

I got reacquainted recently with the term "nostrum." In the healing community, a nostrum is a medicine that offers a remedy for an illness, but in fact it's only an elixir with no proven effectiveness. In human discourse, a nostrum is a statement that sounds good and rings true and is therefore hard to dispute; but it lacks specific content and contains only a partial truth.

I read about a church that was in the throes of deep conflict. Members were disagreeing over an important issue, and the disagreement became emotionally charged. One member got frustrated with all the arguing and made this comment: "When a church is in conflict, the most important thing is for people to love one another and to forgive one another."

Well, who could argue with that? No one would deny the importance of love and forgiveness in the life of the church. But that member's statement was a nostrum. It sounded sweet and had the ring of truth, but it didn't spell out what love really looks like in a church where people hail from different backgrounds and hold contrasting opinions. In all likelihood, this member was so anxious about the church conflict that he or she wanted simply to avoid it, to paper

over real differences under a veneer of “love.” Sometimes, to say “let’s just love one another” is an attempt to shut down conversation, to prevent people from being honest about their feelings, and to avoid taking action. Is this what Jesus means when he commands his followers to “love one another”?

I will be leaving you next month at a time when our own church and the Methodist Church as a whole have some major unresolved issues. Some of our members are quick to affirm that “Black Lives Matter”; others counter by saying that “All Lives Matter.” Some of our members believe that homosexuality is a sin against God; others believe that homosexuality is just a difference in the way people are wired, and that God accepts people with all kinds of wiring. It sometimes makes me wonder: how can we all be “home folks” when there is so much disagreement at home?

Friends, here is my take on Jesus’ command to the Church to “love one another.” He is not saying that we always have to get along perfectly or see issues in the same way. He is not saying that we have to approve of everything another person believes or does. To “love one another” is not something we feel; it is something we do. It means that we speak our truth honestly and listen to others’ truth openly and respectfully. It means that we do not exclude anyone from the table of fellowship simply because they are different from us. It means that we are to act for the well-being of all people, church members and outsiders alike. We are to regard all folks as “home folks,” even though it goes against the grain of our natures. After all, this is why Jesus has to command us to love.

Many years ago, during the Iranian hostage crisis, a Methodist pastor had a conversation with a parishioner who was a secretary at the local university. She told the pastor that she had gotten to know a graduate student from Iran. She had now received this young man into her home where he lived with her family. Because of the Iranian revolution, his funds had been cut off and she was trying to find him odd jobs in town to support himself. She wanted the pastor to hire the young man to work in his yard.

“Does he support the revolution?” he asked. “He thinks it’s all just wonderful,” she replied. The pastor said, “Well, I think it’s rather remarkable that you have befriended him and that you are working to help him out, that you have received him into your home. How did you come to do that?” he asked in amazement. She slammed her fist down on his desk. “Because I’m a Christian, darn it. You think this is easy?”