

A Free Family of Faith

John 8:31-36

All of us are part of a family. We didn't choose to have the parents we have, or the brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles. Our family is a gift to us. And much of the time we are thankful for that gift.



But there are other times when being part of a family is frustrating. We are not free to do exactly what we want to do: we have to take into consideration the thoughts and feelings of others. Although families are related by blood, and share many genetic similarities,

we are also still individuals, with our own opinions, convictions and passions. We can contend and discuss, because we know that heartfelt love for one another will keep us together.



A few weeks ago I went to a large family gathering. Nearly 500 of my family were there, brother and sister Lutheran Christians from across Australia and New Zealand. Over the course of the six days of General Convention of Synod, I got to know some members of this family a whole lot better, especially those seven other people on my table. Together we sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit to lead the Lutheran Church of Australia in sharing the good news of the freedom that comes through Jesus Christ.

I had only met two of the people on my table before. I wasn't related to any of them. Some of us had been born into the church. Two were from overseas. Two of us were pastors. One was a young adult whose faith had been re-energised in recent years, another an adult convert. Together, we were a part of the one family, children of God, not through the same ethnic



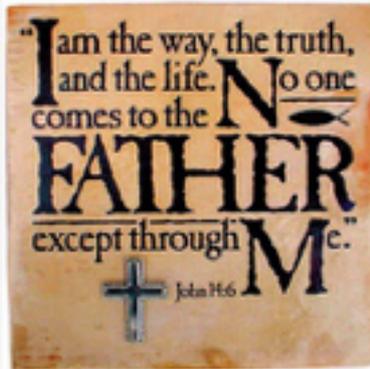
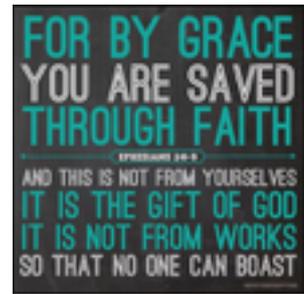
heritage, or the same family, "born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, or a husband's will, but born of God."



As a family, we were able to respectfully and lovingly talk about the hard things, the issues on which we don't think the same way, but to do it in love. And this applied to the 50 other tables, and the synod itself. We listened. We prayed. We worshipped together. We were conscious of the Holy Spirit's presence, especially at the most solemn time when the vote surrounding the ordination of women was taken.

This is because we were united around the heart of the Scriptures, and the compelling truth of the Reformation. We all know how Paul puts it: "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith-and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God- not by works, so that no one can boast."

We also know that Paul understood that this truth came out of the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus says to his disciples today: "If you hold to my teaching, you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."



This truth is, first of all, a person, and not a philosophy. Jesus says that he himself is the "way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." Knowing Jesus undoes the essential truth about humanity: that we are "slaves to sin", and as a consequence, we have no "permanent place" in God's family.

So many people feel that they have no permanent place in life, no secure space where they can be fully accepted and totally loved. They may have been deeply hurt in their own family life, or bruised by the cruelty of others. To them, and to us also, Jesus addresses these words: "If the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."



The truth is that you are not a victim of the choices you've made in the past. Nor is your life the result of having the right family name, or a place of standing in the church, or in the community. We all enter God's family the same way: we die to our old life and we are raised to new life. In baptism, our despair or our pride, what we might think disqualifies us, or indeed qualifies us for the kingdom of God, is swept away, and it is place comes the life of our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ.

The church is the place where this truth comes to life, where the good news of Jesus Christ is released to do its freeing work. It's a grace-place, that God wants open to the world, where love is evident in words and actions, where people are not excluded because of their background, but embraced simply because of this essential truth: they are created in God's image, and they are loved by God, through his Son, Jesus Christ.



This is the love that has brought us together as family. This is the grace that has given us the gift of one another as part of this church family. I didn't choose you, you didn't choose me, but God chose us, and in his wisdom he placed us together, his brothers and sisters in this place, to live" to the praise of his glory." This is true more broadly of the Lutheran Church of Australia, and in New Zealand, and of the church across the world, of all denominations, shapes and sizes, places and peoples.

It was a privilege for me to get a glimpse into this bigger picture, at **General Convention**. Those of you planning to attend Church Unite will also be blessed by the larger family worshipping together. Our synod delegates, Mark Hughes and Kate Burke, are going to share their experience of being part of this larger family at **General Convention**...