Sermon: *It’s all in the family*
Delivered By: Rev. Amber Henry Neuroth
Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria, VA
December 7, 2014
Isaiah 40:1-11
Mark 1:1-8

This year’s Advent theme at Hope is “Love Makes a Family,” so each week we are looking at the traditional Advent scriptures in light of that theme, exploring how love is working in the world to create families of all kinds. That includes families that we were born into but also we are looking for ways that love is working to bring us mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, grandparents, aunts and uncles, even if we are not related to them by blood. So we are going to start this morning, thinking about our own family members. Who is the matriarch or patriarch of your family? Is there a baby of the family? Who do you love easily? Who is harder to love? Who is the matriarch or patriarch of your family? Who brings everyone together? Who is always creating conflict? What is your role in your family? Who is the person who is a little bit different, that person that everybody says “oh that’s just uncle frank or that’s just aunt milly?” Hold these family members in your mind and heart as we explore the rest of the sermon.

I imagine John the Baptist (and probably later Jesus himself) as being one of those latter characters in the family, the wacky ones. Maybe his family members even said, “He’s eating locusts in the wilderness, oh that’s just John.” “He’s wearing a coat of camel hair and sleeping in the desert, oh don’t mind John.” “He’s telling everyone to repent now, the messiah is coming, well you know how John is.” We don’t always know how to react to people like John. You don’t know whether to be proud of him or ashamed of him. People like John make us uncomfortable sometimes in our families, but we often learn something unique from them and sometimes we even cherish them. They are often called radicals, the outliers in our families and in society.

And we still think of John that way as kind of a radical, the “voice crying in the wilderness,” so we don’t preach about him every Sunday, but we do give him one time every year to have his radical say. Because faith is often like family and this is no exception. Faith has those who comfort us and those who seem a little crazy. John is in our family of faith and, as such, we owe him our attention. He is a prophet with a message we don’t always like to hear, but we need to challenge ourselves to hear sometimes. And as we do so, we remember he’s only one of our relatives, one of our parents in faith. His presence is balanced by nurturing characters and messages of love. But that is not John’s message. John is a radical.

Interestingly the word, “radical” comes from a latin word “radicalis” meaning root. The source, the sustaining factor, the cause. The root of the tree, maybe even the root of the family tree. Indeed, this radical leads off Mark’s gospel. No shepherds or manger here. This is the root of the story. Roots. So what are the roots of our family
tree, what are the roots of this tree of faith that we grow together? And what does radical John have to say to us today? What is our wilderness now and what is John voice calling out for?

These last two weeks in our culture have been filled with grief and unrest and conversations about race and justice. Certainly that is one wilderness right now. And sadly it feels like we have had these conversations before and yet here we are again. Grieving the sad realities, trying to figure out how to even have a conversation. Before we talk about John and the roots, I want to say just a bit about why we talk about these difficult things in church and how we have already talked about this one.

In the last couple weeks, we have focused on the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, and Tamir Rice, but there are many others too. Last week you all shared some of your own prayers about it. In Sept, Paul Clay Rooks gave a fantastic sermon with words I will never forget. He said “the color of my skin is code for danger.” Continuing the work, next week, local churches are organizing a vigil and prayer service at People’s UCC in DC. We are going to be listening and talking more in the new year as well. So we are engaged in the wilderness. But I think it’s important that I also speak from the pulpit. That doesn’t mean I am an expert on legal or criminal justice issues. It doesn’t mean that all of you will like what I have to say. It doesn’t mean that I am speaking for black people or taking their voice. That last one is challenging and uncomfortable for me. Every time I feel I must preach on a social injustice whether it be homophobia and discrimination and I’m not gay or domestic violence, I’ve never experienced it, or today racism, but I’m not black, every time I feel I must preach, I am nervous and not always certain. But the cost of silence in the church is just too high. Saying something imperfectly is better than saying nothing at all. And I have seen over and over how maybe just maybe one life can be changed. As you recall I preached on domestic violence a couple months ago. Because we had advertised the sermon, we had a woman attend that day who had just left an abusive marriage two days prior. She stood up and shared in joys and concerns, we prayed for her and offered her our support, we all did. And now she is safely in a shelter and her divorce is almost final. She has a job and soon she will be able to get an apartment of her own. This happened in part because we provided some space.

We don’t know when God will transform someone’s life in that space. So we just keep making the space. We keep seeking our roots. We keep listening for a voice crying in the wilderness.

What is the wilderness now, what is the voice crying for?

I talked with Chris Worth, a friend of Hope, on Friday because he wouldn't be with us today. He's in Ferguson today. I asked him about the scriptures and what he would like to hear preached if he would have been with us. He thoughtfully said Ferguson is the wilderness right now. And he's amazed that so many, like John the Baptist, are
willing to go there to bear witness. To demonstrate for peace, to show solidarity. To
offer their voices. My thanks to Chris for sharing that perspective with us all. For
me the wilderness is also a state of mind, it’s an insidious system of prejudices and
assumptions that lead to life being fundamentally different for some groups of
people. And in that reality, we are all in a wilderness place, separated from God’s
truth, needing the voice to call us back.

We have lots of roots to support us in this effort. We have John the Baptist calling us
to repent, to prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ again in the world. How can
we prepare if we ignore the injustice around us? If we ignore the suffering of a
racially biased system that oppresses black and brown people? So John the Baptist
is our root of Christmas preparation. But we have others, the UCC provides many
strong roots in racial justice.

Our parent churches in New England were strong in the abolitionist movement from
the very beginning, calling for the recognition of then slaves as human beings, as
God’s children. They were involved in forming the American Missionary Association,
an organization devoted to abolition of slavery and to the education of former slaves.

After the Civil War, the AMA started six colleges devoted to education for former
slaves: Dillard University, Fisk University, LeMoyne-Owen College, Huston-Tillotson College,
Talladega College and Tougaloo College, all historically black colleges and universities that continue to
offer excellence, access, and opportunity in higher education. It also founds Brick School, today part of the
UCC’s Franklinton Center in North Carolina.

Our denomination was formed in 1957 and really galvanized together around the
Civil Rights Movement. Hope Church was founded in 1960 and this building was
ready in 1965. Mary Frances, one of our older members, has told me that she and
her husband came to this church because of our dedication to racial equality at that
time.

Our denomination was active all over the county including sending social justice
organizers to different areas to help the African American community in the struggle
to overcome intolerance, intimidation and violence. I’m going to say that again—our
denomination PAID for social justice organizers to go and help black communities in
the struggle for equality. One such worker was Benjamin Chavis who was sent to
Wilmington NC. In 1973 he and other activists were charged with arson. The UCC
General Synod raised their bail and worked tirelessly until Chavis was freed.

These are some of the roots in our family tree, some of the voices calling to us.

When we see the shocking number of black men and boys dying, what are the voices
calling us to do? When we feel ourselves justifying these deaths, justifying grand
jury decisions, somehow telling ourselves “they must have done something to
deserve it,” that’s when we slip into that wilderness state of mind and that is when
John the Baptist, our radical uncle in faith, calls to us and says repent your sins,
prepare the way of the Lord.

It feels so overwhelming, so impossible, how can we change these systems that have
infected us all to the very core? That question is why I am in a family of faith,
because faith only needs one tiny spark to light a fire. Faith only needs one person saying, no, this is not acceptable to me. And the Spirit of Love takes that spark, that one person and brings them to another and another, and then love makes them a family. And suddenly there’s a million marching on Washington, there’s a vigil next Friday lining 16th street, and there is change.

Here at Hope, we are a family with all the craziness and messiness that that means. With just our members, friends and their immediate families, we have beautiful black and brown children that we fear for. We want the world to cherish them and keep them safe as much as we do. We fear the world will not. In our immediate families we have white police officers and military service members of all backgrounds bravely putting their lives on the line. We fear for their safety. We are grateful for their service. How will we do right by them all? It’s so hard. But we start by listening to our family of faith, to the voice crying in the wilderness and by drawing our roots. It starts now and it starts here. When we allow the Spirit to make us a family, then we can grow the circle wider; we can change the heart of injustice. We can and we must, we must do it to prepare, to prepare the way of the Lord. We must do it in the name of a baby who is coming, coming in love to make us a family once more. Amen.