"Becoming Family"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May
First Parish in Wayland
April 29, 2018

What is your origin story? Where did you come from? How does your origin story shape who you are today? Or does it?

We know the origin stories of certain superheroes. Superman came from Krypton. Wonder Woman came from the secret island of the Amazons. Spiderman developed his powers after a spider bite. Have you ever noticed how none of these heroes are raised by both of their biological parents? Superman was an orphan raised by the farming couple who found him as an infant. The orphaned Spiderman was raised by his aunt and uncle. And, Wonder Woman? Well, her origin story changes. In the early comics, she is simply born out of clay by the Amazon women. No father needed. In the most recent movie, however, she is the child of the Queen of the Amazons and Zeus. Significantly, none of these superheroes are raised by their biological parents in an intact, two-parent, heterosexual household.

As a child, my biological parents did raise me. However, I cannot remember a time when I did not know that my mom was adopted. From my earliest memories, my mom searched for her biological parents. When I was in elementary school, she found her birth mother who lived far away. Although her birth mother did not wish to meet, my mom would mail her our school pictures every year, perhaps hoping to change her mind. Eventually, after I had become the mother of my own child, my mom found her birth father, Bob, who welcomed the news and became part of our family. Bob was the first older person I ever saw that looked like my mom. Before she found him, I was the only one who looked like her. *(If you've met my mom, you know this is true!)*

These are the barest of facts about the way in which adoption has been a part of my life story. But, there is so much more to say.

If you feel comfortable doing so, please raise your hand if in some way your family has been impacted by adoption. I'm not surprised. I know that we have many adopted children in our congregation, parents of adopted children, and, I suspect, some who may have placed a child for adoption—or know of someone whose child was placed for adoption. Adoption is not rare.

According to statistics from the Adoption Network, there are about 135,000 children adopted in the United States each year. And there are about 1.5 million adopted children in the United States. Nearly 6 in 10 Americans have had personal experience with adoption.

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And yet, these numbers reflect a decline in adoptions in recent decades. One reason for the decline is that international adoptions have become more stringent in an effort to combat human trafficking—and, in part, as a conservative backlash against same-sex couples adopting.

Another reason for the decline can be seen when you examine the early 1970's adoption statistics. A 2017 *Economist* article reports that in 1971, 90,000 children were placed for adoption. However, after the legalization of abortion, the adoption rate fell in half. By 2014, "only 18,000 children under the age of two were placed for adoption." Put differently, prior to 1973, 9% of babies born in the U.S. were placed for adoption. But between 1996-2002, only 1% of babies were placed for adoption. Such numbers suggest that access to safe and legal abortions significantly contributed to a reduction in the number of babies born to mothers who chose—or were forced to choose—to relinquish their child for adoption.

This is the story I grew up knowing. Conceived before legal abortions (or legal contraception for unmarried women), my mom was born to an unmarried young woman who was hidden away by her parents until she gave birth. In the book, *The Girls Who Went Away*, author Ann Fessler explores the stories of women who surrendered children for adoption before Roe v. Wade. Fessler writes:

> The girls who went away were told by family members, social-service agencies, and clergy that relinquishing their child for adoption was the only acceptable option. It would preserve their reputation and save both mother and child from a lifetime of shame. ... Many of these girls, even those in their twenties, had no other option than to go along with their families or risk being permanently ostracized. (9)

For children like my mom who were born in an era of shame, their origin story remains murky or unknown. For many adoptees in this era, their adoption files remain closed and inaccessible to them. You can feel the silencing power of shame across the decades.

These silences make me wonder: do we need to know where we come from in order to know who we are? Practically speaking, knowing one's biological health history is very helpful. When I fill out health forms, I have to stop and think when they ask about "family history"—remembering to not include the cancer that took my Grandma Sibley because she wasn't biologically related, but adding in the heart disease that took the life of my mom's birth mother. What if you don't know who your biological parents or grandparents were? What would it feel like to have inherited unknown risk factors?

But is biology all that matters in our heritage? What about culture? In the documentary, *Off and Running,* the filmmakers follow the story of Avery, a young, African-American woman

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adopted to two white Jewish lesbians. Avery struggles with all she does not know of African-American culture and where she belongs. While her older brother, a black and Puerto-Rican boy, sympathizes with her identity struggles, he does not share them. Why do some adopted children long to connect with their biological origin and others do not?

I don't the answer. But, I have observed this dynamic in friends and family who have been adopted. For some, knowing where they come from—the stories, the ancestry, the heritage—is an inescapable longing. For others, they don't have the same need. They feel grounded in the story that began with them and with those they have known as family.

Adoption can teach all of us that defining family is not as simple or straightforward as some might want us to believe. Adoption can remind us that family is not simply something we find ourselves born within; family is also something we become by how we choose to relate to one another.

What does it mean to *become family*? "Family", of course, is a slippery term with multiple meanings. One dominant usage of "family" *is* to describe those to whom you are biologically related. But, this feels like a far too narrow definition for many situations and perhaps for many of us. Can't we also *become* family by the choices that we make to affiliate with and care for another?

Adoption is a choice to become family, to identify another as "belonging" to you—not in the capitalistic sense of ownership, but in the sense of soul-deep connection and kinship. As a legal relationship, adoption grants the rights and responsibilities of parenting. While that legal statute affirms the chosen relationship, I suspect that what more deeply bonds relationships as *family* are emotional and relational ties. It's the experience of waking up in the middle of the night during a dream or a fever. It's the picking up the phone, even at an inopportune moment, because you're committed to be there. It's the hundreds of thousands of small, everyday actions that reinforce the choice: we belong together; I am here for you. Even when it's not convenient. Even when it's not easy. Because I made you part of me, my life, my heart.

And yet, our families can also fall far short of what we need. They can be ashamed of you, hide you away, and force you into an action you may or may not wish to do—as with the girls who were sent away. There are also some families who harm children by neglect or active abuse. For some of these children, they will be placed in foster care in the hopes their parents might get the help they need to become safer, more loving parents. Foster families welcome these children—acknowledging that all children need a safe, nurturing community to grow up. At least this is the goal of these families—some foster families, like all families, can also fall short.

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Even though families of many kinds can disappoint, still we often reach out to maintain our family connections or to forge new, chosen families. We weave connections to others in relationships of care and support.

As Unitarian Universalists, we talk about the interconnected web of life of which we are all a part. Last week for Earth Day, we explored how this is true of our connections to the soil, air, and water. But, it's also true that we are interconnected with other people. One of my favorite authors on family, Martha Fineman, wrote a book entitled, *The Autonomy Myth*. It is a myth, Fineman argues, that any of us are ever fully independent. All of us are dependent in our lifetime—certainly as children and also when we are disabled (temporarily or permanently), ill, or dying. Throughout our lifetime, we need others to support us in our care. We need physical help at times. And, we need emotional connection and care.

Did you know that infants who receive no emotional touch fail to thrive? We are wired for connection with other human beings. Autonomy is a myth. We need others. And this, I believe, is why we have families. However, in saying this, I again underscore that family can mean many different things. Family may mean those to whom we are biologically related, but it does not need to mean that. Nor does family need to be limited to those with whom we live or have lived at some point in our lives. Sometimes family is the people who regularly show up at the same coffee house—or coffee hour—each week. Sometimes family is the other foster kids who spent a week or a year or a decade with each other. Sometimes family is the group of friends who helped you through chemo and your battle with cancer. Sometimes family is your neighborhood or your building or your religious community. Family in these senses conveys the importance of being connected to others in relationships of care and concern. Family in these senses focuses on the choices we make to be there for others.

Neither our families, nor our origin stories may be simple. Adoption stories suggest that while our origins may be part of our story, they do not need to be all of our story. We certainly see this in the stories of Superman, Spiderman, and Wonder Woman. Each of their stories expand far beyond where they began—even as their origins impact how they understand themselves and the world. Each of us may or may not be able to trace our ancestry back generations. But we can all decide how we will relate to those we call family. We can all choose how to become family with those in need of care and support. We can all choose to adopt others to be family. Love, after all, is never limited to blood or to DNA.

Love is love is love.

So may it be. Amen.

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