

As you may already know, today is Mother's Day. We also know that day as Christian Family Sunday. But I have another name that I feel better describes the idea of celebrating the Christian Family. Ohana. For those of you who aren't professional linguists or Disney fans, Ohana is a Hawaiian term. It was popularized by the Disney franchise 'Lilo & Stitch', which for any of you that have kids or grandkids growing up in the early 2000s, you may have heard of this film.

It is the story of a little girl named Lilo being raised by her older sister, and acting like the rambunctious little child that I'm sure some of us may have been back in the day, the older sister agrees to let little Lilo adopt a dog to keep her occupied and to teach her responsibility. The dog, given the name Stitch by Lilo, turns out to be an illegal alien experiment who happened to crash land on the Hawaiian Islands. The story is filled with chaos, mishaps, and bad behaviour, but ends on a good note when the alien experiment learns the word Ohana, where Lilo famously says: "Ohana means family, family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten".

However, Ohana was not invented by Disney. Rather, it has existed for generations. Disney's definition brings it to a level children can understand, but Ohana has a much deeper meaning than that. It is a term not only used for blood related family, but close family ties, and even extending beyond that. I know that doesn't sound like much of a definition for you, so I'll use a few examples to clarify.

In the standard definition of a family, there are usually a set of parents, sometimes siblings, children, cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, great grandparents and so on. But our definition of family has grown over the years. There is no universal definition for the word family as some do not have mothers and fathers living in the same house, or sometimes the parents aren't even biological at all.

Jesus' family for example could not fit in this definition. Jesus is the son of God, not Joseph. But despite the baby not belonging to Joseph, he took on the responsibility of caring for Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew 2: 13-23, Joseph risks his life and the life of his entire family to keep Jesus safe from Herod. Verse 16 says: "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under". Joseph probably would have been killed by Herod if they ever found out that he was hiding Jesus. Joseph lived in the spirit of Ohana. No one was left behind or forgotten, and Joseph raised Jesus as if he was his own biological son. But Ohana is bigger than that.

While I was undergoing final exams during my undergrad, I found it impossible to go home for Easter, as I had an exam the Thursday before and the Tuesday after. I had no Easter plans and no one to spend Easter with. After a Good Friday service at the church I attended in Ottawa, I spoke to a member of the congregation. I had gotten to know her through working at camp and attending the Sunday worship services over the years. I told her that I had to stay in Ottawa due to my exams and that I was alone for Easter.

Right after I finished telling her this, she immediately invited me to Sunday dinner with her family. I was a bit surprised, as she also told me that she had her sister and her aunt coming in from out of town, and I felt like I would be imposing. At first, I declined, as I didn't wish to interfere with her family plans, especially with relatives coming from out of town. It can be stressful making sure there is enough for everyone to eat. But despite my initial concerns, she insisted that I come for dinner, and that it would not be an imposition. She opened up her family to me when I couldn't spend it with mine. She became a second family to me

She echoes the words in the gospel of Matthew 25: 35-40: "For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink. I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me. I was sick and you looked after me. I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you? The King will reply: Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'" Do you know anyone who has done that for you, who has given you food while you were hungry or a drink while you were thirsty? Who was once known as a stranger and invited you in, or you were sick and they helped look after you? Are you capable of doing that for someone else?

This congregation is celebrating 230 years of ministry. 52 Sundays a year for 230 years makes 11,960 Sundays that this congregation has met for worship. While it doesn't account for harsh winters and it doesn't include Christmas, Easter, or other celebrations, over 12,000 hours of worship is a long time. We belong to a deep tradition in this congregation. And like any family, we have had our blessings and we have had our trying times. But being here today, we represent not only 230 years of building a community together, we represent 2000 years of building Christ's church. Look at the people sitting to your left. Look at the people sitting to your right. Those that are behind you, and those that are in front of you. Look across to the other side of the church. What do you see? People you may have known for years and years, and people you have never seen before in your life.

When Jesus teaches us to feed those that are hungry, or give a drink to someone that is thirsty, or take care of someone that is sick, or visit them in prison, whom is Jesus referring to? Would you do all that for your Mother and Father? Your Brother and Sister? Your Aunts and Uncles and Cousins? Your own Children? I gather most would agree that they would. What about the people that live next to your house? The people that you work with or the people that you go to school with? Maybe you don't know them as well. What about the homeless that live on the street or the drug addicts or the gang members who commit crimes just to survive? Would you feed them or visit them?

Some immediate reactions might be to say no way. To be honest, that would probably be my immediate reaction. But stop and think for a moment, why is that our automatic answer? To not give money to those that beg for it on the street. You might try to justify it by saying: “Well, they might use it to buy more drugs or they are just scamming people out of money that could go to other areas in need”. But imagine if that were Jesus sitting homeless on the street. Or imagine if it were your own child or one of your parents. Jesus helped the lepers, the homeless, and the worst kind of sinner imaginable. He ate with them, talked with them, healed them, and walked among them. Why can’t we do the same?

Why can’t we extend our Ohana to those we don’t know or to those we don’t trust or agree with? When we help others like Jesus helped the poor, we are bringing the spirit of Ohana to those that could use a little compassion and love in their lives. Those that are broken or hurt or those that suffer in silence. We have a duty, just like if a child needs a parent or a sibling begs for forgiveness. We have a responsibility to help those who need us. Our Ohana is not just blood family or those we hold close bonds with, or even members of this congregation. Ohana is even bigger than that.

There are several examples of global events that bring together so many people around the world to celebrate both unity and diversity. The Olympics that happen every 2 years brings together countries that are at war with one another militarily, ideologically, or religiously. They set aside those differences to compete in sport. Countries like North and South Korea, who are still at war, set aside their differences in the Olympic spirit to celebrate the world’s love of sport and friendly competition.

In Europe, the Eurovision Song Contest has brought a total of 52 countries over its 62-year history to celebrate the love of music. Countries from Portugal to Russia, Iceland to Israel and everything in between have put aside political and ideological differences to perform their songs to compete in an Olympic style competition. If countries like Russia and Ukraine can compete in a music competition despite the Crimean Crisis happening at the same time, can’t we go out of our way to help a stranger? Isn’t that what Jesus calls us to do? To live in a spirit of Ohana, to feed those that are hungry, or shelter those that need refuge.

Of course, we are not expected to end world hunger or end homelessness right from the start. It begins with small acts of kindness. Challenge yourself to do one extra kind act today, whether its saying hello to a family member you haven’t spoken to in years, or inviting the neighbours over for dinner. Maybe volunteer an hour or two out of your day to help at the Agape Centre, or help fundraise for Baldwin House. It does not have to be something as massive as a global initiative. Start out small, and like the mustard seed, your kind act today could grow into an entire movement tomorrow. Celebrate Ohana not only with your loved ones and your neighbours. Celebrate it with those who need a little Ohana in their lives. It might just be the one thing they really need.

Amen.