



## Where They Have to Take Us In

As I write, it is the day after Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving, the all-American holiday, complete with turkey, pumpkin pie, home, family, and table prayer—as in a Norman Rockwell painting. I remember scenes remarkably like that, actually, and I am grateful.

But times change, homes change, and families change. This morning's newspaper carried a banner headline on the front of the local section: "Anoka judge wants to carry gun at work."<sup>1</sup> Why? Since family court has become so dangerous, the judge feels unsafe relying only on the deputies. Only a personal gun will do. Families generate passion of more than one kind. And some of it kills.

Actually, the last observation is not so new. In the Bible, too, a lot of death happens *en famille*. Moreover, despite the current nostalgia about "family values," most of us would not find ourselves at home in the family configurations described in the Bible. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew terms most often rendered with "family" in the NRSV would be better translated "clan," "brothers," and "house of the father." The corresponding terms in the New Testament are "brothers" (again), "household" (which requires a "householder"), and "patria" (and we know what that implies). Biblical "families," as a rule, looked almost nothing like the intimate nuclear families of American mythology.

So, what works as "family" for us? I don't want to sound overly cynical, especially since the gathering at our house yesterday did look quite a bit like a Norman Rockwell painting—except for those members missing (or present) by families split and united in various ways and the fact that, along with the group board games, everybody was occasionally on some kind of electronic device, quite individually, perhaps in touch with an altogether different version of "family."

In Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man," Mary tells her husband Warren, a wearied and wary farmer, that Silas, the hired man who had repeatedly disappointed him, "has come home to die."

"Home," [Warren] mocked gently.

"Yes, what else but home?  
It all depends on what you mean by home.  
Of course he's nothing to us, any more  
Than was the hound that came a stranger to us  
Out of the woods, worn out upon the trail."

<sup>1</sup>David Canen, "Anoka judge wants to carry gun at work," *StarTribune*, November 23, 2012, B1.

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there,  
They have to take you in.”

“I should have called it  
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.”<sup>2</sup>

Silas, we learn, who “is nothing” (that is, no kin) to Mary and Warren, does have a nearby relative—in fact, a wealthy brother who lives just “thirteen little miles” away. But for the dying Silas, the place to be, his family, his home, is with Warren and Mary, with whom he has a relationship and a history, even if a troubled one. That is where he chooses to go to die, even to fulfill a broken promise, and Mary, at least, insists they must take him in.

So, what is home and who is family? Is it kinfolk? “Friends” on Facebook? Colleagues with whom we might spend more time than with kin, even those who live at the same address? TV characters we have seen so often we think we know them, who keep us company when no one else is around? Our cat or dog? But which of these will take us in when no one else will? Or more than that, who is it that offers us “something you somehow haven’t to deserve”? Or where would we go to die? That might be the best definition of family.

For all of us, where we finally go to die is to God. But where will we find undeserved and unquestioned acceptance in the meantime? Happy are those of us for whom kin provide that kind of family. Biblically, it might well be the neighbor, the other, the helper, the friend who will offer “greater love”—even laying down their lives for us (John 15:13). Some of us might find those neighbors among the sinner-saints in our congregations, our Christian communities. I do not mean here the old churches of Christendom, where our name was inscribed on a family pew that we (and folks who looked pretty much like us) had “owned” for generations. That notion of church as “family” can be too cozy, too exclusive, too homogenous. Healthy congregations now tend to be much more diverse, much more messy, much less predictable. That kind of change can frighten us, though, and some will do their best to ensure that everything stays the same—things like family, marriage, and church—perhaps trying to hold on to something that never was. But we will fail in that task—or, if we do not, the church will have to go to find a place to die. The God who will take us in, always, no matter how undeserved and undeserving, is the one who announces, “I am about to do a new thing” (Isa 43:19). Holding on to such a God as head of our “family” may produce a dizzying journey, but it will certainly be an interesting one.

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Frost, “The Death of the Hired Man” (1915), available at many sites online; for example, <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/19369> (accessed November 23, 2012).