

## **Lilo and Stitch and What It Means to Be Family**

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA  
On July 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019

*Luke 15:1-10*

Today we continue our summer sermon series on faith and films with a look at the movie Lilo and Stitch in light of the first ten verses of the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke.

Lilo and Stitch, for those of you who haven't seen the movie, is the animated tale of Lilo, an elementary school aged Hawaiian girl who has been in the care of her young adult sister Nani ever since their parents were killed in a car accident. Nani has her hands full with Lilo, who is acting out. The situation has come to the attention of social services, who sends a burly social worker named Mr. Bubbles to do a home visit, which, to put it mildly, does not go well. Meanwhile, on a planet far, far away, a mad scientist has fashioned an aggressive and nearly indestructible alien (who is about the size and roughly the shape of a dog). This alien manages to escape in a spacecraft which crashes into one of the Hawaiian Islands. The mad scientist and a member of the Galactic Federation are sent off to capture this alien. But the alien, who is knocked unconscious after being hit by a truck, is taken to the pound—where Nani and Lilo wind up adopting him. Lilo names him Stitch. The plot continues with several convoluted twists—as you might expect in a story about an out of control alien and an orphaned girl. But the money line, which Lilo has learned from her deceased father, and repeats to her big sister Nani, is this: *“Ohana mean family. And family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten.”* Not even Stitch, who—spoiler alert—is transformed by the love of Lilo and comes to understand and live out the meaning of *Ohana* himself.

The passage I'm about to read contains the first two of three parables found in Luke 15 that Jesus tells the disciples and the grumbling Pharisees, who are mad because he's reached out to tax collectors and sinners. The two I'll be reading precede Jesus' relating the famous parable of the Prodigal Son. That is the story of the younger son who asks for and fritters away his inheritance before going back home, and the Father who welcomes him back by having a feast, and his angry and resentful older brother who doesn't want to join the party. You've heard lots of sermon about that parable, I imagine. Before Jesus tells that parable, he shares these two. Listen for what they might say about the concept of *Ohana* as well.

*Now all the tax-collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them.’*

*So he told them this parable: ‘Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? When he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders and rejoices. And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, “Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.” Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous people who need no repentance.*

*‘Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it? When she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, “Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.” Just so, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.’*

Every Wednesday at noon we meet as a staff to have a devotional, share lunch, review the bulletin, go over the calendar for the week ahead, and talk about how and what we're each doing. It's often helpful, productive, and even fun. We laugh some. It's a nice little family we have as a staff. We've got a nice camaraderie and input is freely shared—including when it comes to the quote I happen to choose for the cover of the bulletin. Occasionally a discussion ensues. Like this past Wednesday.

More than one person pointed out that in their experience, the quote just didn't ring true. *Ohana means family, and family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten?* That's not the way it was in my family, they said. It doesn't take a lot of life experience to know that there is deep brokenness in lots and lots of families—and no family, not one, is perfect. Families are complicated. Parents can profoundly wound children, siblings can hurt each other deeply, children can cause their parents great pain. Sometimes members of a family don't speak to each other for years, over slights real and imagined. Therapists and counselors make a huge part of their living off of helping pick up the pieces of family wreckage.

*Nobody gets left behind or forgotten?* Really? What about Mary and Joseph, when Jesus was 12, not noticing for **three whole days** that he had stayed behind in the temple after they took off for home? What about the stories of children getting disowned by their parents for any one of a variety of reasons? What about all the children who are abused or neglected? And what about all the divisions that occur in biological and spiritual families over politics and religion? *Ohana*, indeed, right?

Clearly, if I was going to talk about *Ohana* today, I was going to have to think through the objections and the implications. It occurred to me when it comes to addressing ideals like *Ohana*, there are two approaches that are polar opposites. One is to naively and uncritically affirm that this is the way it is. In families, biological, chosen, spiritual, you name it—nobody gets left behind or forgotten. If I took that approach, all of you in the pews would just stop really listening, because you'd know I wasn't speaking the truth. The other approach would be to claim that to even talk about the idea is hurtful because everybody knows families aren't always like that and the pain is too raw for some of us for anyone to as much as mention such ideals.

But then I thought about the life and teachings of Jesus. When he told his parables, he often began them by saying, "The Kingdom of God is like..." When he's saying the kingdom of God is like a sower scattering seed, not all of which takes root and grows, we're okay with that. It matches our experience. When Jesus says the kingdom of God is like a banquet that some of the invited decide not to attend, so the host casts the net of invitation wider, we're probably okay with that, too. That's plausible, and fine, as long as we think we're still on the guest list.

Then again, sometimes what Jesus teaches just seems outlandish. I know how Jesus cast it in the parable of the shepherd and sheep, but what shepherd is going to leave 99 sheep behind just to look for one that has wandered off? It hardly seems economical. Then there's the one about the people showing up for work at 5 in the afternoon getting paid the same wages as the ones who started at the very crack of dawn. That one gets our hackles up. And when it comes to that welcoming the stranger and loving your enemies and being kind to the people who persecute you and not returning evil for evil and that forgiving the one who wronged you seventy-times seven stuff? Well, sometimes that seems like a bridge too far, doesn't it? I mean, doesn't it?

So what do we do with material like that? What do we do with the call to take up our cross and follow Jesus in a life of self-giving love, where we set aside our ego and our pride and sometimes even lay down our very lives for God's sake and the sake of our neighbors? What do we do with the

vision that Jesus casts of a kingdom where all who would come are welcome—and we are called to live lives of radical compassion, because whatever we do for the least of these Jesus' brothers and sisters, we do for him?

Well, one approach is to ignore it because it doesn't match our lived experience. So much of the Kingdom work that Jesus calls us to doesn't line up with the way things currently are in our personal lives or in the life of the world. So we can kind of discard it. Another approach is to deny our experience of life, don rose-colored glasses, and pretend like everything in life is just perfect, all is right and is in line with God's kingdom. A third approach is to say that the kingdom Jesus taught about and lived gives us a vision of the way *it should be* and *could be* in the midst of what currently is. Given that, we are called to work towards what could be and should be.

Which brings me back to *Ohana*, and that story of the shepherd who leaves behind the 99 other sheep to go find that one that is lost, not being satisfied until it was back in the fold. Sometimes *Ohana* isn't about what is, it's about what should be.

There are families that we are born into, and families that we choose, and congregations can be a little bit of both, I suppose. Depending on whether we grow up in one, or join one as an adult. Every year, our Session is charged with going through the rolls of our active membership, and one of the things that we tend to realize through that practice is that there are always at least a few people who have started to drift away. They miss a few Sundays, and miss a few Sundays more, and then they're out of the habit and into another pattern. And maybe somebody from the church has contacted them, but all too often they don't get a special touch from a friend in the church or from the staff, and perhaps they begin to feel neglected—like they weren't even missed. Like I said, *Ohana* is not always about what is, it is about what could and should be.

Now to be fair to the congregation and staff, things are always busy, and nobody wants to seem like a noodge, because that can turn people off, and church attendance patterns across the US are different now than they were twenty-five years ago, you remember that, but then before you know it's been so long that reaching out now feels awkward and uncomfortable, so you don't do it then. So it goes.

Interestingly, my mouse pad in my study has a cartoon on it of Jesus, looking down at a sheep, and saying, "*So there you are! I've been looking all over for you...*" And the thought bubble coming up from the sheep is, "*Well, it's about time! I was beginning to think you didn't care!*"

If *Ohana* means family and family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten, then we have work to do, all of us—to make sure that the members of our particular flock don't drift away and not get a touch from us. Of course, the responsibility—or ability to respond—goes both ways—and as a great sermon I heard years ago at the Festival of Homiletics taught me, sheep get lost six feet at a time. See a little grass over there, six feet. Grazing in the grass, grazing in the grass. A little green grass over there. Six feet. A little tuft of clover over there, six more feet. A little resentment here, six feet. A little frustration there, six feet. Well, it's a nice day and I'm just going to go on a picnic, or it's a yucky day and I'm just going to stay home, six feet. Sheep get lost six feet at a time and the preacher who was preaching that was sitting at a church on Michigan Avenue and said that before you know it you're at O'Hare Airport.<sup>i</sup>

It's possible to catch ourselves in these patterns. So part of our responsibility if we find ourselves doing that is to turn around, because the church isn't the shepherd, the pastor isn't the shepherd—God is. In that same sermon, the preacher, who was addressing about a thousand preachers, turned

to the parable of the lost coin and told us, that what he took from that story is that you can be lost, and still be in the house. The coin was in the house, not outside wandering away. His point was that sometimes you can be in church every Sunday, even preaching the sermons, and be lost—cut off from your deepest and truest self, hiding from or lying to yourself.<sup>ii</sup> Years later, that story came to me when I found my way into recovery from alcohol addiction.

You can be lost and still be in the house.

The wonderful thing about Lilo and Stitch is the way it demonstrates how love can transform someone, and if you happened to watch it, you know that Stitch himself learns to say *Ohana*, and to live into it, by helping to rescue Lilo just as she helped to rescue him. They make their own strange little family by the end of the movie.

At the end of the evening service a few weeks ago, the band played a song from the Forrest Gump soundtrack. You know the song. What the world needs now is love, sweet love. That's the only thing that there's just too little of. It's true.

Which brings me to a final point I want to make about *Ohana* in light of the texts for today and the larger Gospel message. The vision of family that Jesus sets up in the Gospels is bigger than biological and bigger than congregational or denominational and its certainly bigger than race. It's big enough to include the whole world, because as Pastor Susan pointed out in the moment for young disciples, we are all God's children.

So what does that mean for you and for me in a world where immigration is an issue—and the way we treat immigrants is an issue? I am not giving you the answer. I'm just asking you to look the problem in the eye, look the human beings on the border in the eye, and reflect on what *Ohana* has to say about them and about us, if it really does mean that nobody gets left behind or forgotten.

Last Saturday evening I went to a park in Arlington to hear the worship band from my wife Judith's church, Trinity Presbyterian, play a concert. They have a wonderful band. One of their guitarists is a woman named Drusilla. She really wails on the guitar. Over the years I have gotten to know Drusilla and her husband Steve a little bit.

They have one son. One. Six or seven years ago, he told them, "I'm done with you I'm done with the family, we're not going to be in contact anymore." He went off to Europe and cut off all communication with his mother and father. They are not bad people.

So Drusilla came to her pastor, came to Judith, and said, I want to pray about this. I just want to pray about this. Seven different times Drusilla came to our home and she and Judith prayed a particular prayer in hopes that one day her son would come to himself and return home. Or at least try to stay in contact with them.

*Ohana* is about the way it should be and not the way it always is. We all know that life is not always like the movies and things don't always turn out the way we want them to, but last Saturday night I met Steve and Drusilla's son. He's recently come to himself. He's come home.

*Ohana* means family. Family is hard. *Ohana* means family and family means nobody gets left behind or forgotten. Nobody. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Jeremiah Wright preached the sermon I'm referring to at the Festival of Homiletics at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, IL.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*