

Blood and water

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [July 28, 1999](#) issue

"Blood is thicker than water." Though I didn't always know precisely what they meant by it, this is a saying I heard from relatives on my mother's side throughout my childhood. My great-grandmother Grammar tended to utter these words when she believed family members needed to close ranks against outsiders, or at least think and behave in a manner worthy of the family name. This maxim always seemed to me to have a judgmental quality to it. For example, Grammar and her daughters, my great-aunts and grandmother, were notorious for making fun of the looks and character of every woman my poor great-uncle John Bundy tried to go out with. It is all too easy to imagine that this phrase was a major weapon in the arsenal with which they kept him single and at home until the day he died.

It's hard to say precisely what the phrase meant to my manic-depressive great-grandfather. With his expanding lands in western Kentucky, Papa was big on caring with style for his wife and six children, and he provided for a fairly large number of distant cousins as well. Still, his pattern was to go moaning to bed for the entire winter, "groveling in the ashes," as my mother used to say. Then he would leap up with manic energy at the return of spring and resume his farming and his hobby, which was to buy up at rock-bottom prices the farms of his neighbors who were in financial difficulties.

However Papa generally felt about people who were not blood kin, one summer early in the century his own sister Lucy was in trouble due to debts on her farm owed to the bank. As best as I can make out, Papa heartlessly bought that farm right out from under her—and refused to sell it back to her later, no matter what she offered.

Though families like mine don't feud much in western Kentucky, I can tell you that thick blood is a much stronger medium in which to sustain a grudge than water. There are no longer strong bad feelings between the descendants of great-great Aunt Lucy and those of Papa, but there still isn't much socializing among them either. Even after 80 years, no one is about to forget the original outrage.

Whether or not we grew up hearing this peculiar phrase about blood and water, most of us are convinced of the point. We group ourselves not just into families and neighborhood communities, gender and ethnic identities, political parties and organizations, even congregations and denominations, but also into warring or scornful factions within those groups. Daily we identify ourselves, and teach our children to identify themselves, by making comparisons with those we think we are better than—socially, politically, morally or theologically—or with those who are to be avoided because they have betrayed us. We don't do much of this with sinister intent. And if we could see what we were doing in the first place, we could give a very good-sounding justification for it.

That we do it, I'm afraid, is a lot of what we mean when we say that human beings are territorial animals, and it makes me worry about the possibilities for anything like real peace in the Balkans or the Middle East or Africa or Ireland or the United States of America or in my own family. Or especially, God knows, in our divided and even warring churches.

Blessedly, as Christians we can ask for something more than blood loyalty or feuds, for something other than a powerful and safe place to dwell with those who do not threaten us. In the fourth century, as bishop of Alexandria, Athanasius argued for the truth of Christianity by pointing to the indisputable fact that the church was able to appeal to and transcend a variety of cultures, so that Christians could make up a single people in spite of their differences. I find his argument profoundly moving.

At the end of the 20th century we know, of course, that there are problems with such a unitary and utopian vision. How can we not remember, for example, what has happened over the centuries to women in the churches, and to a variety of minorities? Surely it is precisely as Christians that we need to claim the particularity of our experience and our identities before God.

At the same time, I am convinced that, called as we are to love God with all our hearts and minds and strength and soul and our neighbors as ourselves, we must find a way to avoid simply writing others off, individually or collectively, consciously or unconsciously, as unworthy of our company, no matter how good our reasons seem to be.

One of the great teachers of the Egyptian desert, Abba Theodore of Pherme, used to say, "There is no other virtue than that of not being scornful." I know very well how

hard a virtue this is to exercise and how much practice it takes.

But we do not have to exercise this virtue by ourselves. Thank God, the water of our common baptism is stronger than our factional ties and our scornfulness. If only we attend to it, it will gush out over every one of us, just and unjust alike, like a clear hard rain. Then we will grow like wheat on the hillsides, and be gathered together as ripe grain, and ground to make a single, nourishing loaf.