

The Church: As the Family of God

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St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

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Readings: Psalm 103, Matthew 12:46-50, Romans 8:14-19, Hebrews 2:10-13

As soon as someone mentions “family” how do you feel? What images, thoughts, feelings come to mind? For some, there is an almost visceral, gut reaction to the term. For some people the family brings thoughts of warmth, of comfort, of security, of joy, of peace. Yet for others, sadly, “family” does not have such positive connotations. Yet time and again it is family imagery that is portrayed in the Scriptures to illustrate the relationship of God with His people. We are taught to call God “Father”, to see each other as brothers and sisters, even Jesus. In European based societies the roles and language of family have been quite strictly defined. Yet in other cultures, such as that of the Pacific, the roles are more fluid. Take for example “uncle” and “aunt”. For Europeans this traditionally has only referred to your mother or father’s siblings or on occasion to a very close family friend of your parents. Whereas in Pacific culture “uncle” or “aunt” generally refers to those of your parent’s generation. In Jesus’ time the closeness and functioning of the family was critical as there was no social welfare system or external system of care. This generally meant that your family was all that you had to fall back on. The parable of the Prodigal Son reflects this reality. The errant, rebellious son, having publically humiliated his father, is now sitting with the pigs. He comes to his senses and realises that the only way he has of moving forward in life is to go back and fall, to some degree, on the mercy of his father. Jewish traditions gave strict obligations, particularly to the oldest male of the family, as to how to care for the elderly in the family and for widows, women and the young. The family was and remains a complex series of obligations and relationships that always works best where there is genuine love and care between all of the members. It should be where we can grow up, learn and experience life with a large degree of love, safety and support.

Let’s pose a question here. What is it we do we do as Christians when we deal with the idealism of the Christian family and the realities of life? Let’s look at it this way: in our Christian faith we have a goal to work towards. The Lord shows us what is good and challenges us to step up and make that reality. Ok so I’m not the best father in the world. I can see many faults and I’m sure my wife and children could more than elaborate on what I could and should have done and could and should do. And they’re probably right, at least about a lot of things. But am I going to beat myself up about it? Get depressed and withdrawn because I fall short? No way. It’s the devil that wants to make us feel like failures and unworthy before God. But withdrawing, giving up, frustration and depression are not the ways of the Loving God. Rather He sets the standards and helps us to live up to them as we make the effort. Faith and works have to go hand in hand. Further we might identify that some people have, apparently, more work to do than others. I say apparently because people are very good at putting on a show for others but what goes on behind closed doors is another story. But the reality is that all of us have work to do when it comes to being members of a family. No two families are identical. Each works out its own life but, ideally, within the parameters of God’s intent for the loving, caring, giving family. This should be the classic case of continuous improvement – none of us are perfect but we are all working towards the goal Christ calls us to in who we are to be in Him.

In Matthew’s gospel we see the definitive break Jesus makes with his own biological family when it comes to the mission of the Kingdom. We might observe here however, that He did not see that this removed Him from the obligations as a good son or as head of His family, we’ll come to that

later. Prior to Jesus' resurrection, most commentators agree, Jesus' own family did not recognise Him for who He is, with the possible exception of Mary. In fact, when Jesus began His ministry they may have thought He had gone stark raving mad. They were standing outside, apart from the people around Jesus, not wanting to identify with them. In the passage from today's reading had Jesus' family come to take Him away? To stop Him before He went too far? Before He upset too many people? In the passage of Matthew 10:34 Jesus states: **"Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law— a man's enemies will be the members of his own household. Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it."** You might think this barely helps good family relationships but what it is a hyperbole of comparison, an over the top comparison to make a point, similar to Jesus suggesting we cut off a limb or pluck out an eye that offends. We don't see lots of blind, lame Christians wandering around who took that literally do we? It is not that the family is an issue here but the focus is on the centrality of our relationship with God. Let us put this another way. Jesus does not suppose bad family relationships. Instead He sees really good ones but He wants our love of God and our prioritising of His purposes in our lives to take preference over what should be one of the closest relationships we have – that with our family. A man and his father, a mother and her daughter, should be among the closest of life-long relationships. You get the idea. But any relationship that comes before your relationship and obedience to God is actually idolatry. This is the sword, the challenge, the cutting edge – will we place God before all else? Will we do God's will over that of our family, particularly if the family's will isn't in line with God's purposes? Who do we, will we, put first?

So, as Matthew reports, later, when Jesus' family came to Him, ostensibly to remove Him from what He was doing and take Him home, we get His classic redefinition of the greater family: **"Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."** This redefinition of family potentially encompasses anyone from anywhere in the world if they have committed their lives to the Lord and are living that out. Note the link with the life that lives out the expressed faith – those who are *doing* the will of the Father. These are Jesus brothers and sisters – our family.

In Romans 8 the apostle Paul tells us how this process of becoming part of God's family comes about. Simply put, God adopts us. For Paul, trained as he was as a Jewish Pharisee, adoption was something particularly special in Jewish thought. God's heart had been to adopt the Children of Israel as His own. In Jeremiah 3:19 we get that lovely passage where God says, **"I myself said, 'How gladly would I treat you like my children and give you a pleasant land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.' I thought you would call me 'Father' and not turn away from following me."** But so many of Israel went astray and only a remnant claimed the status and inheritance that could have been theirs. So when Paul spoke of God adopting us all, Jews and non-Jews, into God's kingdom as God's children he was stating a truth that was incredibly radical. As in Galatians 3:28 there is indeed no Jew or Gentile in this reality – we are all equal children of God.

What does this mean for us? If we love and serve the Lord with our lives we too are children of God? Romans 8 tells us some of the benefits for the children of God who are led by the Spirit of

God. The Spirit affirms in us that we are not slaves – to any person or any institution. Some of you may want to think about that. How easily do we become slave to the workplace, to the institution? ... and we allow it. Nor are we slave to fear – fear of people, fear of the present, fear of the past, fear of the future, fear of failure. Rather, Paul says, the Spirit has brought about our adoption as children of God and therefore we can come into God's presence and cry "Abba, Father." We can talk to God in the most intimate of terms as a young child would with their loving Dad – full of love, simple trust and confidence in what Dad can do. Furthermore, as we dwell on this the Spirit speaks to our spirit testifying that we are God's children. We need to know this deep within ourselves. We, each one of us, need to know that God deeply loves and cares for us in whatever situation in life we find ourselves and that He has great plans for our lives that will give us our deepest heart desire to fully know Him. And Paul adds a rider that we need to also acknowledge. If we are His children, then we are heirs along with Jesus. Therefore, in this world we will need to share in Jesus' sufferings in order that we may also share in His glory. Why? Because in His great love God wants to continue to engage in this world that is still full of evil so that as many as possible can come to salvation. This is His work that we are and will be, part of in this world, so that we can gain many more brothers and sisters in this glorious family.

We conclude then with a brief observation or two from the book of Hebrews. In Hebrews 2:10 the author makes the interesting observation that Jesus was made perfect through suffering. It seems an odd comment because to be perfect is to be perfect isn't it? In fact, in Hebrew there are two different words for perfect and the Book of Hebrews is an incredible strong Hebrew work. The two words are *tamam* and *calal*. *Tamam* is the root of the word used in almost all Greek uses in the New Testament and refers primary to ethical purity. *Calal* refers to an aesthetic sense of beauty or perfection more akin to the Greek image of the ideal person. Ethical purity requires the working out of the ideal in the real world. You might see how closely this ties to faith. You might think you know and understand something but it is not until you do it that you really know what you know and what you don't know. You might think you will know what you will say and what you will do in a situation but it is not until you are in that situation that you really know. You might even train for something studiously and conscientiously but until the "rubber meets the road" as they say it is all theory. Therefore, Jesus was made perfect but suffering, by enduring reality, by doing and not just by being – just like us. And, to extend the metaphor, Jesus is our older brother. He has gone ahead showing that things can be achieved and how to do them well. Not that He can do what we need to do for us but He has shown us it is possible. And He is willing and able to help us as and when we need assistance just as a good brother does. When we do God's will, as our faith and our practice grows, as Jesus makes us truly holy, then He is pleased to declare our names, to declare your name, to His Father and the heavenly host – our older brother proud of us.

We are the family of God. Called and chosen. Brought together for His glory. As we do what our older brother wants, as we follow in His footsteps, as we love and care for each other, we bring glory to His Name. All the gifts, talents and abilities we have been given together and individually, truly find their purpose when we are His witnesses in the world as we demonstrate being a truly loving family in His Name. We too, like Jesus, are being perfected, together, to His glory so let's keep up that good work, as family, until He comes.

Amen.