

“The Family of Faith”
Genesis 26:1-5; Galatians 6:7-10;
Ephesians 2:11-20; Mark 3:20-35

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We have been working through the idea that we journey together. Another way of saying that is that we have a story we live out. There are different elements of that story. We started out thinking about how a beginning point we have is the faith and trust we have in God, and how that begins a new kind of journey. We realize that with any story, with any journey, there is some sense of struggle in it—some tensions that arise. We struggle with one another and how to get along and what to become. And yet we feel called into togetherness as the body of Christ. Last time, we talked about being that body of Christ and how challenging that is. We continue today to think about what it means to have togetherness as the body of Christ.

Jesus gives us another image for what that’s like. It’s the image of family. So often when we think of family, oftentimes the first image we have is of a couple of parents and a couple of children. And yet we know that family is much more than that. There are all kinds of families. There are extended families. We can think of families not only in terms of our biological families, but we can have the Vandal family or Cougar family, depending on which side of the line you’re on. We can think about family in different ways.

One of the things we should think about is what does family mean? We can put some generalized terms with it. We usually think of family as having generative elements. Oftentimes we think of it in terms of children, but it’s not just that. It’s a way of shaping things, of bringing forth something new. It’s a covenant, a way we agree to live together and try to be in relationship with one another. We begin to have a shared identity as a family. It’s something that becomes part of how we identify ourselves.

In our society, and particularly in Jesus’ day, it was in economic unit. It was about being part of that society’s way of functioning. There’s co-habitation. We find that in some ways it’s easier to be together and do things, to share the load.

The family is a core social unit, and has been in almost every society in almost every place. There’s a way in which that forming of family carries the society. It is formative in socializing and bringing somebody up into a society. We often think of it as having some limits and defined boundaries to it. Do you go to the University of Idaho? That puts you in the Vandal family.

It’s the center of human activities. Oftentimes we put family as one of the central highest priorities in our lives. Generally, I think, most of us do put family as the central thing in what we do. If we are going to do something, we prioritize the family.

We don’t often think about it, but it gives us responsibilities and obligations. We recognize that in being part of a family we often have responsibilities and obligations to

one another and to how we do things. We are shaped by our families, and our families will give us ways of seeing what is good or not good.

Family changes with time. We may think about a family with a father and mother and some children, but that changes over time. I remember when I could cradle my children in my arms. I can't quite do that with my children anymore. The family changes over time, and yet there's something consistent about it.

When we think about family, we may think about it in terms of all of these things. There is a certain positive sense to it. Hopefully that's the way it always is. But most of us probably know that we haven't always had things flow quite the way we expected them to with our families. There may have been some level of conflict in our families. The interesting thing about that is when we do begin to have conflict in our families, it feels like the bonds we have are beginning to fray. That fraying feels bad.

In the Christian church, it feels to me like in some ways we've missed that call to be the family of God by the way we have frayed our bonds. We are sometimes are very hard on one another about who we are as people of faith, as children of God, because we don't believe quite the same things. We don't behave quite the same ways. Or we're not the same color. Or... We can find a lot of ways to fray those bonds. The interesting thing for me is that it often feels like within a family our conflicts are different than when we have a conflict with somebody outside the family. We will be a little more restrained, probably, with somebody from outside the family. We have some social conventions that we will try to hold onto. But inside the family? We can let go of some of those. We can hurt one another in ways that we wouldn't do outside.

I remember when we lived in Lake City. It was a small place. Not more than 500 people lived there in the wintertime. Those people who had lived there for a long time and knew each other most of their lives, I think they felt like family. It was place where it just felt like family. By the end of February when winter was getting long and mud season was beginning and life just didn't seem that easy, people began to get on each other's nerves. It seemed like some argument erupted that always felt like was a little more vehement that it needed to be simply because they felt like family.

Sometimes I wonder if we don't see those places in our lives where we expect to have a similar perspective, similar views, and a similar set of values when we're a family of some sort. Even in a community, even in a nation, I think we see ourselves as one people, one family. I think that sometimes when we do have a conflict, it gets ratcheted up because we have expectations about how we're supposed to treat one another. And yet we don't because we're internal. It feels like our struggle today over a Supreme Court nomination has been so divisive because of an expectation and because we know that within a family, sometimes people go over lines or draw lines. So the description of the trauma of sexual abuse and how that has brought out feelings and experiences for people has left us with a sense of trauma that seems to permeate our society today. We have all these ways of drawing lines between each other because of real problems that we have and yet how do we solve any of that?

It wasn't that different in Jesus' day. There is always a way to recognize "us" and "them." In Ephesians we hear about that "us" and "them." It's the Jews and the Gentiles. We could probably read that by putting in "us" for Jews and substituting "them" for Gentiles. What Ephesians says there is that Jesus came to break down that very boundary, to break down that wall and to say there are no Jews and Gentiles. There are only children of God. As much as we may struggle with one another and realize how we can ratchet that up, he invites us to take another look and to see a God who comes to us to invite us to not just fight with one another, but to look to him, to look to Jesus and see what he might do with us, how he might guide us. In fact, the passage goes on to say that we become one in the Messiah. We become one in Jesus Christ.

It's really easy to be divided when I think about the divisions I have with someone else. It's not as hard when I have to think about what we have in common. What I believe is in common for all of us is a God who comes with love and grace to guide us and to show us the way, to heal us and to bring us together around a table.

So often when we think about a family we think about how we fall into it, almost. We don't choose our biological family. We may choose the college we go to, and suddenly we're part of that family. What other kinds of families are we part of? Jesus' biological family is coming to ask him to be different and yet he knows what his calling is and what he needs to do for God. He looks around at the people with him and says, "The family of faith is when people do the will of God. Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother, and my sister, and my mother."

Does that mean it's all about works? Let me put it this way. I don't think it is because I think the invitation is to be part of the family. If you look at the idea of family, if we're going to be part of a family we have responsibilities and obligations to our family. There's something about being part of that family that you can't really do unless you engage with it. Then you are truly in that family. Somebody can tell you you're in the family, but if you don't engage with it, how true is it? That's what Jesus is saying. We truly become family when we engage with doing the will of God.

It's interesting that one of the central things in doing the will of God is simply to come together in peace to work for peace as we hear what he says. He broke down the wall so there may be peace. Come together so that we can share in each other's lives and encourage one another in the down times and perhaps challenge one another when we need to be challenged, and to try to work things out together. I think one of the problems we have is that when we think about arguing with one another we think about it in a metaphor of war. We think about who's going to win. What if we used a different metaphor? What if argument were a dance? Instead of who's going to win, the question would be, "How are we going to work this out so that we do something beautiful together, that we learn from one another?" If we stay with the metaphor of war, we might end up dead, but if we can dance together we will be more alive.

So Jesus invites us into a family of faith, and the central thing is to begin to dance together, maybe stomp together, maybe sing together with people from around the world and to come to the same table together. Embodied in this is a very central core piece of what Jesus invites us to be and do—to be people who can eat and drink together, who can recognize that the salvation, the saving grace of God, is found in being together.

God heals us and engages us as we come together around a table. So we get to come, remembering that we have a God that invites us to know the grace he's given us and to share that grace with one another. God invites us to be a family in which we realize what is central is loving God with our heart, mind, soul, and strength, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. God calls us to be that family where we take care of one another. We have obligations and responsibilities to God and to one another and to the way we are in the world that we might follow Jesus in the way, that we might join the dance and leave the fighting to someone else. Amen.