

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
August 21, 2016

Faith and Family

Matthew 12:46-50

As Mary and Jesus' siblings approached the house where a crowd had gathered, they could hear singing. At first, the music and words sounded a little fuzzy. But the closer they got, the more they could make out the tune and the lyrics: "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God—/ I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood! / Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod; / For I'm part of the fam'ly, the fam'ly of God." What could possibly be more inviting than a heartwarming hymn sung by a small band of Jesus' followers assembled for a service of healing and preaching. Perhaps that kind of sweet-sounding fellowship could be an effective tool for attracting outsiders to this new community that Jesus was creating.

But whatever growth potential was created by the music ministry was diminished by some of the content of Jesus' teaching, in particular, his views on the family. When his own blood kin showed up looking for him, he said that his primary family was the group of disciples who had attached themselves to him. He pointed to them and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother" (v. 49-50).

Now wait a minute, isn't the church supposed to be an organization that supports and promotes family values? Aren't we supposed to be in the business of strengthening marriages and encouraging the development of healthy relationships between parents and children? Doesn't our ministry include building solid households where the love of God is taught and practiced? Isn't Jesus just hurting the cause and undermining our mission by making radical statements about how his "family" of disciples takes priority over our closest relatives? Surely people back in Jesus' time cared just as much as we do about family love and loyalty.

For the most part, that's true. In ancient Mediterranean society, devotion to family was crucial. In our culture, we tend to give the individual pride of place. But in the New Testament world, people put the group first. And the primary group that claimed a person's allegiance was his or her family. The good of the family was supposed to take priority over one's personal desires and aspirations. The extended family, with the patriarch at the head, was the primary source of your relational identity. It determined who you were and how you lived. Loyalty to family was the chief criteria in your daily decision-making and behavior. In short, life in ancient Mediterranean society was all about the family. And this fundamental social reality was only intensified by the shaping power and influence of religious traditions and practices.

This is the social and religious context in which Jesus shows up, announcing that the reign of God has arrived, and calling people to give their lives to him and their devotion to the new family that he's forming. Jesus has no problems with the idea of family loyalty. But for him, primary allegiance belongs to the family of his followers, not one's family of origin. Kinship by blood matters, but kinship by faith and baptism matters more. Now this doesn't mean that family concerns are just tossed aside, by Jesus or by the Scriptures as a whole. The family is still celebrated as a good gift of God's creation.

Devotion and constancy in marriage are urged and expected. Children are to be taught and nurtured in the will and ways of God. The home is to be a place where adults and children seek the Lord and live together in his grace. Granted, in today's Scripture passage, Jesus expects that his disciples will give primary allegiance to the community of his followers. But that doesn't mean that he has a total disregard for the feelings of his loved ones. Our text is very brief. We don't know what Jesus said to Mary and his siblings after this episode. We're not told that he rejected them or viewed them as enemies of his mission and message. These aren't Matthew's primary concern. The essential point is that for Jesus, this new spiritual family takes priority over his natural family.

And Jesus expects his disciples to have the same priorities. He isn't just stating his own personal commitments and practices. He's also declaring what's expected of those who want to follow him. That's because faith in Jesus not only brings you into relationship with him but also into relationship with the community of believers that he's gathering and forming. As the early church leader Cyprian once said, "No one can have God as his Father who does not have the church as his mother." When you trust in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, he insists on bringing his family with him. So becoming one of his followers means that your life is now joined to both Jesus and his whole network of relatives. You gain a whole new group of spiritual siblings.

According to Jesus, the best way to describe this group of siblings is that they're doing the will of the heavenly Father. Like all kinship groups, this spiritual family called the church is defined by many things. These include what we believe, what we preach, how we worship, and so on. But what defines this family of Jesus, more than anything else, is our lifestyle as his people. It all comes down to how we're actually doing the will of God revealed in Jesus Christ, and how we're practicing the life of God's kingdom among ourselves and toward the wider world. That's the key mark of the family of God.

It's no wonder that being in a spiritual family with these kinds of priorities and this kind of lifestyle challenges us to examine and think through where our ultimate loyalty lies, and how to live accordingly. As Christians, we belong to two families, a natural family and a faith family. So to which do we owe our highest allegiance? Which family should be your higher priority, your family by birth or your family by baptism? Based on both the preaching of Jesus and the practice of Jesus, we are called to treat the family of God as our primary family.

Of course, stating that as a broad principle is one thing. Actually working it out in the details of family life, at home and at church, is another. You may be in a situation where most of the people in your family are faithful followers of Jesus, actively participating in the life of his family, the church. In that case, devotion to your spiritual kin and commitment to your biological kin fit comfortably together. There's not a lot of inherent tension between your relationship with your natural family and your relationship with Jesus' family. In fact, the life of your own household may be pretty well integrated with the life of God's household.

Others of you may be in circumstances where there's skepticism about your faith or resistance to the ways that you make God's family a priority in your life. Some folks in your biological family don't share your commitment to Christ, and aren't enthusiastic about your love for the family of God. They may not be resistant, or downright opposed, to your commitment to Jesus and the fellowship of believers. Their response to your spiritual kinships may be more of a benign indifference. "Going to church again? Well, you know me. I'm not really into organized religion. But hey, if that helps you feel better and cope with life, more power to you. I'm happy for you."

Then there are other more extreme cases where individuals, because of their commitment to Christ and his church, face outright hostility from their biological family. They may end up being rejected, excluded, and even banished from their family of origin because of their connection to the family of Jesus. "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother," says our Lord. These aren't mild and pretty words designed to decorate the inside of a greeting card. They're words that, if received, believed, and practiced, can realign some of life's most fundamental loyalties.

Put simply, when Jesus calls you and me to follow him, he calls us to put the family of God first. That doesn't mean you'll go out and intentionally start trying to stir up trouble among your relatives. It simply means that your relational identity, your sense of group purpose, and your involvement in a larger mission in life, come primarily from your connection to the church, this new family created by Christ. When it comes to living in solidarity with others, your main focus, as a disciple of Jesus, is on nurturing and cultivating the ties that you have with your faith family.

This may inevitably create strains, tensions, or distance in relationships with some of your biological kin. But in many cases, putting the family of God first will simply mean that you treat your natural family as a context for fruitful service to God and faithful witness to the love of Christ. It means that life in your own household will take its cues from the character and calling of the church, and that you'll view your own family within the bigger picture and larger story of God's family. Rather than just seeing the church as a group that's here to serve your family's purposes, you'll see your family as a group that's here to serve the church's purposes. Rather than focusing on how you can fit the church into your family's life, you'll focus on how your family can fit into the church's life. You'll take your own household, whatever its form and condition, and offer it to the cultivation and strengthening of God's household.

In last Sunday's sermon, I spoke about the family atmosphere that often comes with being a small congregation like ours. Within the life of a small church, we develop intimate spiritual kinships and mutually enriching bonds with brothers and sisters in Christ. We become a household where the love of God is shared and the will of God is done. And this household becomes the place and the space where we grow up and mature in Christ. I like the way that Anne Lamott puts it in one of her books where she shares a story that she once heard from her minister:

When [my minister] was about seven, her best friend got lost one day. The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was very frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, "You could let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here."

Lamott goes on to say: "And that is why I have stayed so close to [my church]—because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their tawny voices, I can always find my way home."¹

"I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God—/ I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by His blood! / Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod; / For I'm part of the fam'ly, the fam'ly of God." Ultimately, in God's eternal purposes, that's the family that matters most.

¹ Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies* (New York: Anchor, 1999) 55.