

# We Are Family

sermon digest

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Ephesians 3:14-21

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In recent years family values has become a political buzz word for highly controversial very conservative ethical positions. The public marketplace is oblivious to the fact that families do not naturally have values and that some family values are sick. Janet Fishburn, *Confronting the Idolatry of Family: A New Vision for the Household of God*, illustrates that family is not an object of worship in the New Testament. Rather than the culture family setting the stage for the ideal community of the church, the family is defined by the God who has parented all of the families on the face of the earth.

The family is also a source of untold grief and terrible sickness in our world. A few years ago, I was exploring with my congregation the basis for Christian values in human sexuality. I made a comment before delving into the biblical material that some people found offensive. I said that the Bible does not always give us a good model for sexual behavior. The same could be said of the family. Family in the Bible is the context of jealousy, anger, and even murder. When Jesus was describing the family connection for our salvation, he told of a dysfunctional Jewish family in which a loving father was torn between the resentment of the older son and the misbehavior of the younger son. Psychiatrists are constantly probing the depths of family sickness that causes dysfunctional adults. Some families in our culture are devoted to crime, and others are communities of abuse.

**We need a higher model of family.** Paul sounded a note that went all the way back to the life and experience of father Abraham. More than a claim to exclusive possession of favor from the God of creation or a right to arrogance about ancestral superiority, the covenant tie to father Abraham established responsibility and family ties to all of the peoples of the world. Abraham was not only a nuclear family blessed by God. Abraham was the center of God's blessing to the whole world. The blessing included Gentiles. Paul had to argue the point with members of his new family of faith. Gentiles may have been at one time aliens to the promise of God, but through Christ, God's family was coming together so that no longer was there Jew or Greek, slave or free, male and female. We are all one in Christ Jesus.

So, Paul offers a prayer to "the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name." This is a bigger family than anyone could have imagined. This was a more inclusive family than anyone had ever before accepted. The real tie that binds us together as family is not just father Abraham; it is the One to whom Jesus taught us to pray "Our Father."

In St. Louis in the early 1970's, the Catholic Radio and Television Commission produced a regular television program, "New World Coming," in which a Protestant pastor, a Catholic priest, and a Jewish rabbi shared a round-table to discuss their views of current moral issues. I was the token protestant. The TV program was one of several new ecumenical experiences for a Bible Belt Baptist. For the first time in my life I was rubbing shoulders with Jewish and Catholic neighbors on a daily basis, and our children were learning songs for Hanukkah as well as Christmas at the local elementary school. The TV program provided an acquaintance with a Conservative Jewish rabbi. Conservatives are in the middle, not as radical as the Orthodox or as theologically or socially liberal as the Reform Jews. I found the rabbi to be at least as committed to his family of faith as I was to mine. He noted that he was careful to observe Kosher laws, not because he felt that they were demanded by God. Kosher was basic to Jewish identity. Regardless of where he lived or traveled, Kosher food brought him in contact with brothers and sisters in his family of faith and provided common ground even if they spoke a different language or came from opposite parts of the world.

The Jewish family was the basic building block of the faith, the very foundation of the Old Testament community out of which the Christian church emerged. The covenant relationship with God through father Abraham was at the core of Jewish identity and the tie which bound the whole community together. Having a common father, they shared common values and lived by a common covenant. If you understand the family pride in Judaism, you begin to understand the insult that was registered when John the Baptist declared (Matthew 3) that God is able to raise children of Abraham from stones, or when Jesus said (John 8) before Abraham was I am, or when Paul declared (Galatians 3) that if you belong to Christ, you are Abraham's offspring.

Eventually the nation took its name from a man, from Abraham's grandson, the patriarch Jacob

later named Israel—man of God. Israel, however, was not just a man who lived once upon a time; Israel's twelve sons fathered the twelve tribes forming the structure of the nation. A common word for family was *beth*—house. Jacob/Israel's family included all of his offspring and servants numbering 66 persons excluding his son's wives.

Marriage was more than a bond between a man and a woman; it was a covenant agreement between two families in which the bride and groom lived at the point of connection. At the point of origin, the Covenant tied the people to God. They were the family of God by election. They believed that above all of the nations of the earth God had chosen Israel. In spite of being run over by foreign armies, driven out of their land by pagan potentates, and taxed into poverty by Rome, the Jews maintained an arrogance beyond comprehension by their neighbors. They continued to think of themselves as the family of God with a mission in the world. The Jews survived in a hostile world by holding to their family values and family identity, but the tie that binds was stronger than national and biological unity.

Paul did not deny the importance of Jewish family or denigrate the importance of blood ties, but he saw something more in family.

***Family is a community of joys and sorrows.*** When we are tempted to idealize the family as a place of constant celebration and unceasing joy, we need to get our feet on the ground. The Jewish family was a mixture of failures and successes, of virtues and vices, of joys and sorrows; so are we. I was in high school full of life with all of the future ahead of me when the father of one of my best friends fell ill with lung cancer. This was not right. Mr. Roberts was a model father, a devoted Christian, and an example of the kind of quiet strength that boys needed before them. The slow trek from hospital to sickbed and finally to the hospital to die was one in which the whole church was involved. I learned a few early lessons: We have no guarantees on life. Being young does not mean immunity from pain or loss. But, more important, I learned how important the family of the church can be in the crises of life. We were not blood kin, but make no mistake, we were family all the way to the end and the new beginning. In the midst of all of the pain and suffering a strange thing happened. Wayne's sister had a baby. At the very moment when all was lost, and it seemed that no one would ever have reason to smile again, new life came into that family and reminded them, and us, that life has beginnings as well as endings. Ultimately our lives are in the hands of a loving eternal God who surrounds us with that love through the family of faith.

***Family is a community of faith.*** The ethnic connection through ancestry and history does not define the family of God. From the outset, the family of God was bound by a common Covenant and a common faith in the one God. We may look different and dwell in different houses, but we come together as family when we worship God, and we come together as family when we gather around common concerns and celebrations. Fishburn was right about there being no magic in the connection that places DNA ties above spiritual connections between people in community. In the struggle to bring Gentiles into the church, Paul argued that our faith ties are more important than nationality or culture. Even Abraham was connected to God by faith rather than some genetic right of inheritance.

As we gather today, we gather as family. While we are aware of the struggle of our brother Grant Stradley to hold onto life, we have reason to celebrate 65 years of marriage for George and Mona. We could try to ignore our sorrow in order to celebrate, or we could cancel our celebration in order to grieve together. But this is the way it is with family. We have absolutely no control over the turn of events that leads us to the sober moments of sorrow, and we cannot possibly plan without interruption what tomorrow may bring. We can be present to each other in our joys and sorrows. Being the family of God with each other is the best that we can be in joy and in sorrow. Thanks be to God.