

Easter 2014

Family of God

Easter. Like so many holidays, it is a festive family celebration. Relatives drive or fly in from distant places to celebrate the holiday together.

Out of curiosity, raise your hand if any of the following family activities applies to you: You have ever or even still do decorate and hide Easter eggs. You have ever had to wear matching outfits with your siblings and pose for the perfunctory family photo. You have ever gone with your family to the mall to visit the Easter bunny. Here's a good one: you have ever sat down with your family for a veritable Easter smorgasbord of honey-glazed ham, creamy mashed potatoes, home-made stuffing and dessert. Well, Easter is a festive family celebration; but we got to think outside the bun, per Taco Bell, and redefine what we mean by family. In this room right now, we are having a family celebration of Easter with some of our local relatives at the same time as literally hundreds of millions of other siblings as we all celebrate the fact that God our Father has raised our eldest brother Jesus Christ from the dead – family that we may never meet now, but which we will meet someday and with which we will spend eternity. Today, I want to talk about the family that has the most reason to celebrate Easter – the family of God. And we're going to look at three things in the verse I just read: makes and made holy, same family, and unashamed brother.

Makes and Made Holy

“Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy...” (**Hebrews 2:11**)

A couple quick questions: first, who makes us holy and second, what does that mean?

First, who makes us holy? Answer: Jesus by his sacrificial death. We read, “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.” (**Hebrews 13:12**) Jesus makes us holy through the shedding of his own precious blood on the cross of Calvary – the event at the center of the solemn commemoration of our Lord's Passion on Holy Thursday and Good Friday. If you heard the gospel narratives of our Lord's passion during Holy Week or maybe saw a cinematic depiction in a feature film like “The Passion” or “Son of God,” and wondered why would Jesus, God the Son, die that excruciating, humiliating death on the cross and suffer such acute physical and emotional and spiritual agony, there are many correct answers, but here's one: to make the people holy through his own blood. That raises our second question: what does that mean to make people holy? Very simply, it means to cleanse people from their sins and consecrate them to God. Christ purged away our sin-stains with his precious blood – as we read, “the blood of Jesus his Son purifies us from all sin (**1 John 1:7**) – and consecrated or set us apart for God as his own. If you're here today feeling grimy and foul with sin, burdened with guilt and acutely aware of the gulf that separates you from God, believe on Christ and appropriate his sacrifice for your sins, apply his precious blood in your behalf and allow the Lamb of God to cleanse you from your sins and consecrate you to God.

Now, there are many ways we can talk about our relationship with God in Christ: we can talk about being his purchased people, ministers in a royal priesthood, citizens of a holy nation, friends of God; but Hebrews 2:11 brings up another: we are set apart unto God as members of his own family. So...

Same Family

Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. (**Hebrews 2:11**) Hear that again: both the one who makes men holy (Jesus) and those who are made holy (us) are of the same family! Think about that: when we believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, God incorporates us, not into a civic club, secret society, or fraternity - he incorporates us into his family.

First, if you believe on Christ Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior, you become a child of God; for we read, “You are all sons of God through faith in Jesus Christ.” (**Galatians 3:26**) How do we become children of God? First, we are born of God. “Yet to all who received him, to those who

believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God - children born, not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God." (**John 1:12-13**) When you believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you are born again and from above by the Holy Spirit as a child of God; second, not only are you born of God - you are adopted by God; God chose to make you a part of his family: "His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ." (**Ephesians 1:5**)

So we are born of God and adopted by God as his sons and daughters, and with the apostle John we exclaim, "How great the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are!" (**1 John 3:1**) so right now, if you've been going through this week feeling discouraged and defeated, remember who you are and whose you are: remember your identity as a child of God.

Second, not only are you a child of God; you are not an only child of God. B. Paul Greene tells the story of Tammy Harris, a twenty-one year old convenience store employee who decided to track down her biological mother. She had no success after an entire year. Then, one day, she overheard a coworker named Joyce talking about her twenty-year long effort to locate her biological daughter. When the two began trading birth certificates, they discovered that they were more than co-workers: they were mother and daughter, they were family. Greene concludes the story, "Each week we rub shoulders with people whom we may barely notice. But if they share a birth in Christ, they are our dearest relatives." I've had the same experience: my co-worker in the classroom next door, the art teacher on third floor - they are both sisters in Christ; and there are literally billions more don't know living on my block or living or on the other side of the world.

God's family is a big family; we are all children of the same God and heavenly Father, and we are all brothers and sisters of Christ and in Christ of one another. Our family is inclusive of all believers regardless of denominational affiliation, political party registration, education credentials, race, age, gender, nationality - you name it. How wonderful it is that, if you have believed on Christ there is no way that you can not have a family.

Unashamed Brother

I read an anonymous online post titled, "I am so ashamed of my brother and don't want him at my wedding," in which the writer states: "I recently got engaged and will be getting married next year. I am 34 and have been living independently since I was 25. My brother is 37 and still lives at home with my mom and step-dad. He doesn't have a job, friends, or a girlfriend. He spends all his time in his room playing games and drinking. He doesn't know anything about the world, and yet he has half-baked opinions to thrust down your throat at every opportunity." The writer goes on to explain she is so ashamed of him, she is afraid to introduce her brother to their fiance's family and are even thinking about not inviting him to the wedding.

Maybe you have felt like this anonymous writer, ashamed of your brother or sister. You don't want your circle of close friends and acquaintances to know that he's your brother: after all - he's a former drug addict or he's a high school drop out or he's had several failed marriages. You don't want to even admit that she's your sister because she made that bad choice and that bad choice. Or maybe you have personally experienced the pangs of knowing your brother is ashamed to even call you brother. But Jesus is our unashamed brother. We read, "So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers." (**Hebrews 2:11**)

Let's go back to that first Easter Sunday, when our risen Lord met the women racing back from the empty tomb. We read, "Then Jesus said to them, 'Do not be afraid. Go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee; there they will see me.'" (**Matthew 28:10**) Go tell my brothers. When we learn more about the disciples, we see uneducated fishermen, a hated tax collector and a violent revolutionary among them: but Jesus was not ashamed to call this rag-tag bunch of Rabbinic school rejects his brothers. When we read the passion narratives, we see the disciples all fall away, they all abandon him save the

beloved disciple who stands beneath the cross. We see Peter insist that he will never deny Christ only to thrice deny him before the rooster crowed. Even that same Easter Sunday, we read about the disciples' cowardice, hiding behind locked doors for fear of the Jewish religious leaders, and we read how they did not believe the women when they told them the glad tidings of the empty tomb and the risen Lord. They dashed, denied, doubted - but Jesus was not ashamed to call these men who had let him down his brothers.

The same is true of us today: he is not ashamed to call us - to call me and you and you - his brothers. Think about that wonderful truth, that marvelous manifestation of our Savior's love for us: he is the second person in the Tri-une God-head, God in the person of his eternal and only begotten Son: and what are we? He is the Creator and we are his creatures, he is without sin and we all have sinned. We are all finite mortal creatures who not only have sinned but still get tripped up by sin, still stumble into idolatry or greed or lust or selfishness or pride or hatred or what have you. Yet despite all that Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers. Once again, if you have been going through this week feeling discouraged and defeated, remember that Jesus calls you brother and be encouraged by that amazing fact.

One more thing: if Jesus is not ashamed to call us his brothers, neither should we be ashamed to call him our brother and call one another our brother. Sometimes we forget or deny or downplay that family relationship but John - you are more than a friend and co-worker in this church: you are my brother. Shirley, you are more than a friend, fellow member and servant leader at Trinity Church: you are my sister. And you are my brother, and you are my sister and on down the line.

In closing: You were each given a fork at the start of this morning's service, and we talked about how we may not know all our brothers and sisters now, but we will all meet them and be with them in eternity.

There was a woman diagnosed with terminal illness and given only three months to live. She informed her pastor of her final wishes for her funeral service and internment, including one curious item: to be buried with a fork in her hand. The pastor asked why to which the woman answered: when I was a kid, mom would pick up our dinner plates and always remind us to save our forks - the best was yet to come; and then we'd have some sweet dessert, whether a moist cake with buttercream icing or a slice of apple pie ala mode. I want people to wonder why I'm buried with a fork in my hand and then you tell them: save your fork - the best is yet to come.

That's true. On Holy Thursday and Good Friday, we remember Christ has died. Today we remember that Christ is risen. And because he died and rose again and we have believed on him, we have confidence that we should save our forks - the best is yet to come. Many of you will leave here today and sit down at a family dinner - but the day is coming when we will have an even better family dinner. The day is coming when our Lord will return, and all our brothers and sisters in Christ who have fallen asleep in the Lord will be raised: for our Lord's resurrection this Easter Sunday two thousand years ago guarantees the hope of the resurrection of the dead which we confess; as the Scriptures declare: "But the fact is that Christ has been raised from the dead. He has become the first of a great harvest of those who will be raised to life again." (1 Corinthians 15:20) The day is coming when we the Lord will take us to the mansions he is even now preparing for us in our Father's house, and we will take our places at the feast in the kingdom of heaven and sit as one big happy family at the wedding supper of the Lamb.