

Where Love Is, There Is Family

From the series: I Do Believe

Text: I Corinthians 13:8, John 11:1

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

This is Mother's Day. It is not a Christian festival day. Purists condemn the practice of celebrating Mother's Day in worship. And it can be put down rather sharply by those who claim it is only a cynical commercial effort pandering to human sentimentality. However, one ought to know the power of the institution before one puts it in the dust bin of history.

Mother's Day is big.

And rightly so, if celebrated with perspective. Who of us will ever make it up to our mothers? And is not that intimate connection one of life's most wonderful bonds?

And, so - Here's to Mothers! Thank you! God bless and keep you!

It is not only the threat of our sentimentality that might give cause to celebrating Mother's Day in worship, however. A more serious matter has to do with the fact that Mother's Day is often portrayed in the context of parents and children in the ideal family all smiles and happiness. And for so many, that is not the situation, and, if that ideal is associated with God's blessing, one may impose not only the sadness that one's situation is not ideal but a load of guilt for not measuring up.

It is perhaps this latter situation more than any other that always causes me to think carefully about the message for this day. And I have a wonderful word today - one that is good news for all of us and each of us - it is this:

Where Love is, There is Family.

I do believe in the possibility of human community whose bond fundamentally transcends blood ties and is relationship rooted in love and respect and shared vision. In other words, Mother's Day gives me an opportunity to point to the critical importance of human community and the manner in which human community fosters healthy, mature persons, on the one hand, and on the other, how healthy, mature human persons form family.

While our biological family is key and certainly, in the purview of this message, you will see that I use “family” as designation for a bonded human community, be it a small circle of friends or a faith community such as Christ Community.

I do believe, where Love is, there is family.

In our day, "Family Values" has become politicized and the phrase a slogan appropriated by the more conservative sectors of society to push their socio-political agenda.

It is interesting, therefore, to realize that the New Testament does not provide much material to support the Family Values folk. We have noted more than once here that Jesus comes off as hardly a model child. I could have chosen to read Mark 3:31ff - the context in which Jesus' mother and brothers come to bring Jesus home because the word on the street is that he is mad. To that request to return home, Jesus says, pointing to those gathered around him,

Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother. (Mark 3:34-35)

I chose another Gospel reading, however, to illustrate concretely the contention of this message, that where love is, there is family. The paragraphs opening John 11 and 12 describe the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus at Bethany, just outside Jerusalem. This would seem to have been Jesus' "home," Jesus' "family" to the extent he had one.

In the 11th chapter, Mary and Martha send a message to Jesus that their brother Lazarus is ill. The illness is apparently obviously serious for them to send for Jesus.

In the 12th chapter, it is another journey to Jerusalem, this his last. He comes to Bethany and Martha served a dinner, celebrating the life of Lazarus. At dinner, Mary anoints Jesus' feet with costly perfume, which irritates Judas, who criticizes the waste, commenting the money would better be given to the poor. Jesus defends the action of extravagant love.

I am not treating in this message the narratives per se - the raising of Lazarus or the criticism of Judas. Rather, I point you to a family - Mary, Martha and Lazarus. They obviously were family through blood ties. But, love dwelled there; they were family in a more fundamental sense.

And this was a family where Jesus found a home; they were family to Jesus. There was clearly tension between Jesus and his biological family. They were anxious about him, probably embarrassed by him. Everyone was talking about him. They were uneasy about that. People thought him off the deep end. That reflected poorly on the family.

I can identify with that. My name is a four-letter word. But, it is misspelled as often as spelled correctly. Half the time it comes out Rehm. My dear aunt in Kalamazoo always breathes a little easier when the *Kalamazoo Gazette* gets it wrong. Not so in Bethany. The door was always open; the welcome mat was out for Jesus in the family of Mary, Martha and Lazarus.

When the sisters send for Jesus, they say, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."

And the Gospel writer tells us, "... Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus ..."

In the 12th chapter, the dinner party, Mary performs an act of extravagant love. She breaks a year's wages of perfume over Jesus' feet. Love does extravagant things not weighing the practicality of the deed.

That is love and where love is, there is family.

Happy the person whose biological family is such a center of love, respect and shared values and vision. But, in all honesty, is that not somewhat rare? Have we not often found that an even deeper bonding occurs where, in our maturity, we find our soul mate or soul mates - that circle, that community where we have found love and acceptance for the persons we are at core?

The biological family is so critical for our formation and we must be committed to the shaping of healthy families because family so critically shapes us. But part of the maturation process must be a process of individuation whereby we move out of the biological family.

A few years ago *The Atlantic Monthly* published an article entitled "Chronic Anxiety and Defining the Self." It was an introduction to family systems theory, which, unlike psychoanalysis, which derives from Freud's paradigm focusing on the individual, focuses instead on the structure of interlocking relationships in which a person is involved. Not a person as an autonomous psychological entity (Freud), but a person enmeshed in a "family system."

The insight of this analysis of family systems theory that speaks to my concern today is the recognition that a mature human person who begins in a biological family - a totally dependent being, must through stages of development move toward emotional separation from dependency on family of origin. The psychological term is differentiation and, according to family systems theory, there is an instinctually rooted life force, which propels a person to grow into an emotionally separate individual.

Family systems theory also assumes an instinctually rooted life force that moves toward togetherness, keeping members of a family emotionally connected and operating in interaction with each other.

The reason I refer to family systems theory is simply to point out that healthy families will seek to enable the developing child to be not only connected emotionally but differentiated as an individual, able to establish his or her independent self-identity.

As we focus on the family today, that is a very important insight and it should be the goal of a healthy family. Too often we see dependency lasting too long and sometimes there is parental pressure that fosters that dependency.

I run into that lingering parental control most often in regard to the Church. I have often related the amusing story of the woman who had joined CCC from another denomination in the 70's when there was eruption of newness all about and something exciting happening most every week. She asked me one Sunday, "What's happening next Sunday?" I replied, "Nothing special." She said, "Oh good, my mother is coming."

Over the years I have witnessed it over and over again - with many of you here - a certain nervousness about how parents will receive the news that their grown, adult children are joining Christ Community that has for twenty-five years been on the cutting edge.

I do understand that. I, too, am a parent.

But, I am also clearly aware of my responsibility to cut loose my children so that they can in their independence and maturity choose their spiritual path.

In *The Atlantic Monthly* article to which I referred, there is an excellent description of the person who has achieved a strong degree of emotional independence and a strong sense of self-identity.

He begins growing away from his parents in infancy and becomes an "inner-directed" adult. While always sure of his beliefs and convictions, he is not dogmatic or fixed in his thinking. Capable of hearing and evaluating the viewpoints of others, he can discard old beliefs in favor of new ones. He can listen without reacting and can communicate without antagonizing others. He is secure within himself and his functioning is not affected by praise or criticism. He can respect the identity of another without becoming critical or emotionally involved in trying to modify that person's life course.

(The Atlantic Monthly, 9/1988)

To produce such daughters and sons should be our goal as parents. The description is an ideal and we all fall short at many points, but an ideal helps us to examine how clear we are in the execution of our task and how well we are doing.

I cannot reflect on the emotional health of the family without making the application to the family of faith as well, for it seems to me that the ideal of a congregation is very similar to that of the family.

Some years ago, James Fowler wrote a book, *Stages of Faith*, in which he described the stages of faith development, much as Eric Erickson described the developmental stages of learning and Kohlberg the stages of moral development. I was struck at the time by Fowler's contention that many congregations and many pastoral leaders program in the stultifying of spiritual maturation in order to keep the people in a state of arrested development. By short-circuiting the spiritual development, such ecclesiastical leadership breeds dependency in the flock and thereby more easily controls the people.

This, of course, is tragic, but it is obviously a widespread practice of religious institutions.

It should be clear that such practice militates against the forming of spiritually mature persons who have a spiritual/moral identity that is really their own. Just as in the biological family it is critical to foster the development of emotional independence, that is, to aid and abet the process of differentiation, so in faith families the goal should be to form persons with their own spiritual center who take responsibility for their spiritual growth and development.

That is a hallmark of Christ Community; for twenty-five years we have been emerging as a faith community with a special image. For a number of years now we have used the phrase "An Alternative to Church as Usual." That such a phrase is more than a slogan without substance has been vividly demonstrated in these last months.

In 1971, the congregation then gathered demonstrated a kind of boldness and liberal spirit in that it changed its name from the First Reformed Church to Christ Community.

We declared our allegiance to the Reformed tradition and had not the slightest thought of ever leaving the RCA. We did, however, recognize that the name "Reformed" had become a label and that the rising generation would less and less be impressed with labels. We saw the need to create a new image and the name Christ Community gave us an identity to live into.

We foresaw, too, that a growing ecumenical trend could best be captured by a name that invited a broad spectrum of confessional groups to become part of the blending of traditions that would enrich each and enhance the whole expression of Christian Faith.

This congregation saw the future and moved toward it in 1971 and we have been moving toward it ever since.

There has never been any intention of moving out of denominational affiliation but, in reality, we have created a new community here which has had little engagement with the Reformed Church, except through my own considerable involvement with the RCA at the national level.

For some, long ties with the Reformed Church in America are important and the thought of separation is painful. That is understandable and it is regrettable that a choice is being forced on us.

For I suspect the majority, the move out of one's "family of origin" was taken when you joined Christ Community. This congregation is composed of persons who have had the spiritual maturity and strength to leave their spiritual home and affiliate with a local community that manifested the spiritual vision and values that reflected their own.

I do believe that that is healthy - a sign of maturity, of strong spiritual identity. For, finally, whether we think of our biological family, or our faith family, our goal should be the forming of emotionally independent, mature persons with a strong self-identity, and that involves both differentiation and connection.

Mature, fulfilling, satisfying humane existence demands both independence and community and the only really healthy commitment to community comes from one who has realized a measure of independence. Then commitment is willed and engaged in freely with joy.

No formal structure - biological family, ecclesiastical institution - can provide that; it is achieved through development of mature self-identity.

Where that is the case - where persons have such mature self-identity, beautiful community is a possibility - in family, in faith family, for where love is - there is family.