

We Are Family

James 2:14-26

Good Morning Church Family,

It's good to be together this morning! We missed spending our Sunday morning with you all last week. As I think most of you know, we were in Minnesota last weekend and it was really special to spend Mothers Day with my Mom, which hasn't happened in quite a few years. I bumped into a couple of my Aunties over the weekend. I saw my brother and his family at my niece's softball game. It was a lot of time with family, which got me thinking about families and family systems.

What makes a family? Some would say it's about being related. Blood is thicker than water, and all that. There are genetics, of course. I have my grandmother's eyebrows, and my Father's sociable personality. I have my Mother's eyes, and my father's temper. There is something deep and special about being genetically connected to another person.

But a shared DNA is certainly not the only thing that counts for creating a family. We talk a lot with our kids about how every family looks a bit different, and there is no right way to be a family. In many ways, Family is about those we choose to live and love in a close community with. The people we commit to. Family, in its broadest definition, is

about caring for one another, looking out for one another, and how people treat one another, we tell them.

Sometimes families aren't healthy or safe places to be, so we need to break away, and find a new family, so to speak. My sister, who is a charge nurse for an Acute Psychiatric Care Unit at large hospital in the states will often tell her patients, who come from unhealthy home lives, "When you're a kid, you can't choose your family, but now, you're an adult, and you can choose you who have in your life."

When I think of family now, as a daughter, a mother, and even more specifically, as a Christian is that Family are the people who you can come home to, even if that home isn't the one you grew up in. Family are the people who care for you and about you. The ones you call when you're in trouble. The ones who warn you away from trouble or a bad decision, the ones who show up for you. Family means caring for one another.

And that is exactly, the sort of community, the sort of Family, that we are called to be as the church. Because Jesus has united us through his loving action, and, whether we like it or not, we are now a family, in all the good, hard ways. When I talk about caring for one another as a family of believers, I'm referring to the very practical things and care that the church provides to those within a church community. Sharing meals together. Caring for one another when people are sick. Prayers. Words of encouragement. Affirmation. Bearing one another's burdens. Providing for one another's needs. These parts of church, while maybe not very flashy or often feel "like church" are truly the

fabric of a faith community, the things that build up the body of believers into his best self, it's most Christ-like.

At our church back in Manitoba, their unofficial motto was "How would a family, of which Jesus Christ is the head, treat one another? We try to live out that answer to that question one week at a time." They really made that the cornerstone of their church's culture. What needs were in the church? How could they meet those needs? Every Wednesday evening, they had a mid-week Bible study, which more often than not, ended up being a work bee. Linda is a single mother, we're going over to rake her fall leaves. Fred and his family are moving, everyone comes over at 6 pm to pack boxes. It was this church that packed up our lives in a uhaul for us when we headed to Saskatchewan. They showed up. They did the work, they cared. Don't misunderstand me, this church was not perfect, no church is, but caring for one another is something they did do really well, and that act of caring for one another is a formative part of Christian Discipleship. So let's talk a bit about how caring for one another, as a family does, forms us as individuals more and more into the image of Christ

First, let's talk about the why. Why should we, as disciples of Jesus, care for one another in these practical ways? Because faith and action are inextricably interconnected. Jesus calls his people to do both, to hold them in balance with one another. Faith is not more important than action or vice versa, both are equally important.

That's exactly what James was talking about in the passage that Carrol read this morning." What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but does not have works? Surely that faith cannot save, can it? If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith, and I have works." Show me your faith apart from works, and I by my works will show you faith. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder."

This both/and ecclesiology is central to the identity of the church. What good is it to say, Jesus loves you, and I'm sorry there is no food on your table. You are welcome in God's house, can't you afford some better Sunday morning clothes? No, our faith in God, our generous receipt of God's love inspires us to offer that same generous care to the people in the row across from us.

To be clear, I think the marriage of Faith and Action is something that our church generally does very well, but we need to remind ourselves from time to time about just how crucial this is. Indeed, it is HOW we follow Jesus.

Following Jesus is a group event, like baseball, or like singing in a choir. It starts with one person who wants to play baseball or sing in a choir, but the real thing does not happen until there is a group. Following Jesus is not a group event because we need

each other's love and help in order to follow Jesus, but because loving and helping each other is itself how we follow Jesus.

Let's drill down a little further, into caring for one another as part of personal spiritual formation. How does this faith and action, this caring for another, shape me, Emily? Or Carrol? Or Bob? What is changing within our own selves when we practice this?

First, it draws us out of selfishness. I was trying to figure out a way to word that didn't sound quite so harsh, but that's the truth behind the idea. We are born as ego-centric beings, that's the way we're wired.

On the long drive this past weekend, the kids and I were listening to one of our favorite podcasts, it's called "But Why? A podcast for curious kids." Basically, kids write to the show with their questions about literally anything and the show finds an expert to answer them. The episode that we were listening to was about babies, and they spoke with a baby scientist from the University of Los Angeles. The researcher talked about how all babies are born with no self-awareness, they only know that they exist. This is because babies are utterly helpless, they would die unless someone met their needs, so they cry and generally make a fuss to get their needs met. It's only much later on in toddlerhood that they become aware that there are people besides themselves, and much later still that kids learn that those people have needs that might be more important than their own. Let's be honest, I'm still working on that some days. Generally speaking, children who grow up in caring, responsive families develop a more robust

sense of empathy. When loving empathy is modeled, kids pick up on that.

In the same way, Jesus's example of radical love for our souls and our bodies, models for us how we are to love and care for one another. Jesus says, in John 15, "There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends." Christ has modeled self-giving love for us and we must live that out. Christ' love draws us out of our self-centeredness and into a more Spirit directed way of living. Galatians 6:8-10 says, "Those who live only to satisfy their own sinful nature will harvest decay and death from that sinful nature. But those who live to please the Spirit will harvest everlasting life from the Spirit. So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessings if we don't give up. Therefore, whenever we have the opportunity, we should do good to everyone—especially to those in the family of faith."

A brief aside here- I think it's interesting that Paul adds that caveat at the end, "especially to those who are of the family of faith." It's as though Paul knew how challenging it can be to love those we are in closest proximity to, and also the reminder that the family of faith is the proving ground of love. If you can't love and care for the person across the aisle, how are you going to love and care for your enemies?

As we live out this practice of love and care for our sisters and brothers in Christ, as we would for our own families, it helps turn our hearts even more to those in need around us.

Okay, so that's one side of the equation of caring for others-it draws us out of our selfishness, into a Christ-like posture. The other side of the equation is equally as important- allowing others to care FOR us reminds, in the best, most sacred way, that we are needy people

We live in a time and culture that values self-sufficiency. Don't need anyone, make your own way, stand on our own power. It feels good to be needed, it doesn't feel good to be needy. It feels good to give, it sometimes feels harder to receive. Yet, the gospel of Jesus, tells us the truth that we are needy people. We need to be rescued and redeemed from our own egos, our own apathy, and really our own false sense of self-sufficiency.

At our church in Manitoba, one of the women of the congregation, Sharon, was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was caught early and she had a very good prognosis, but it did mean surgery and chemotherapy. Sharon and her husband, Dave, had four kids, in their late teens and young adults, three of the four kids lived at home. Definitely at an age and stage of life where they could hold down the fort, so to speak. But the church organized meals for their family, delivered every night for two weeks after Sharon's surgery. Dave, bless his heart, tried so hard to protest his help. They were doing fine. We can take care of things. We all know how to cook! And our pastor, who had been close friends with Dave for 25 plus years, took off his glasses, massaged his forehead, and said, "David. We're going to help you. And you're going to let us."
...."Okay."

It can be so hard, right? But part of being a family of disciples means serving, and also allowing ourselves to be served. Both are formative.

In closing friends, when we say yes to Jesus, we say yes to being part of this family of faith. We say yes to caring for one another, not just on Sunday morning, but through the whole week. How would a family, of whom Jesus Christ is the head, treat one another? It means caring for one another's bodies and souls. It means looking beyond our own interests and to the interests of others. It means serving, and being served. Ultimately, it means loving one another, as Jesus first loved us. Amen.