

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

The Ministry of God's Family

(Psalm 145:4; Deuteronomy 6)

Introduction: Images of the church...

The New Testament authors were nothing if not creative writers. Their letters are rich with analogy and simile and other figures of speech, including metaphor.

Nowhere do they let their imaginations run wilder than when they are describing the church. It wasn't hard to describe the people of God in the Old Testament. They were the ethnic Hebrews, physical descendants of Abraham.

But the church. The church is something else.

There are no ethnic markers. There is no geographic boundaries, no economic signposts identifying either a Christian or a church.

So, Jesus and Peter and Paul used metaphors to add color to what could be a black and white understanding of what the church is all about.

They tell us that we are the **BODY** of Christ. In view is a human body where every part of that body is essential for the proper working of the whole. The inherent message is that the church is an entity where each Christian is essential to the proper function of the church.

We are a **VINE**. In a grapevine, each branch draws its life from the trunk. So, each Christian - and the church - draws its life from Jesus.

We are a **TEMPLE**. Just as the Temple in Jerusalem was built stone by stone into a dwelling place for God, so each Christian is a "stone" that is forming a holy house, put together to worship God.

We are a **ROYAL PRIESTHOOD**. In ancient Israel, each Levitical priest ministered to the Lord. So today, each member of the church serves a similar priestly role in speaking to God on behalf of people in prayer as we lead holy lives.

We are a **FLOCK**. Each sheep in the flock follows its shepherd wherever he leads. So the church is a community of believers who follow Jesus, our Chief Shepherd, wherever He leads.

We find other, perhaps less obvious figures for the church in the New Testament. Of those, there is one that I'd like to key in on this morning.

That would be the church, as **FAMILY**.

The Church as Family

(Casting a vision for who we are)

Our Bond in the Family of God

Maybe this is a bit risky. There is obvious warrant for calling the church a flock, vine, body. The Bible actually uses these metaphors.

But, after careful search, I've found that "family" is never used in the New Testament to refer to the church.

I find that fascinating - but I don't think it is a showstopper that should keep us from using the idea of "church as family" this morning.

The essential ingredients of family are clearly present in the church!

God is Father

Hundreds of times, the New Testament refers to God as the Father of His people.

Jesus said, [Matthew 6:6] “But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you.

And Paul wrote in Romans 8, ***[15] For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”***

In human terms, when people have the same father, they are united into the same family. So it is in the spiritual realm.

You call God Father because of your faith in Jesus. So do I. That makes us family.

And that’s why there is so much talk in the New Testament about “the brethren.”

We are all “brethren” (sistren)

When Paul wanted the Christians in Rome to stop judging and condemning each other, he appealed to the reality that the church was FAMILY as the compelling argument for love.

[Romans 14:10] But you, why do you judge your BROTHER? Or you again, why do you regard your BROTHER with contempt?...

Every person you see sitting around you this morning who has placed the treasure of his or her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ is your brother, your sister, a son or a daughter of God the Father. We are family!

And the brothers and the sisters here at Northwest Community Church, like those in any church, are diverse. So diverse!

The Family of God - HERE!

In our church family are infants and toddlers and pre-schoolers and elementary school aged kids.

Our family consists of teens and collegians, recent grads and young men and women just launching career.

There are single adults of all ages - and people here are single for a variety of reasons. Newlyweds and golden anniversary celebrating oldyweds are in our family.

There are single parents and couples with youngsters, couples with kids of all ages and couples with no kids, senior citizens (“Senior Moments” is still the best name for a small group I’ve ever heard!), and people from most every age and station of life in between.

And that is the “family” that IS Northwest Community Church!

Like any family reunion you’ve ever attended, every church is a diverse group of individuals. We come from all walks of life, are at different stages in life, and occupy different stations in life.

Now, when Kathy and I were deep in the throes of child-rearing, I tried to regularly remind myself that FAMILY was **not** all about (for us) five people eating meals together, sleeping under the same roof, and trying to juggle schedules.

No, Christian family - mine and yours - is a group of people engaged in an epic quest to follow Jesus! Families work best when they understand that they are on a mission.

That is true for flesh and blood families and it is just as true in the family of God.

Being family, we are on a mission together.

Living as Family

(A vision for how we are to be with each other)

Doing What We Do TOGETHER

You and I are journeying toward the fulfillment of the Great Commandment, learning to love the Lord our God with heart, soul, mind, and strength.

We're journeying toward fulfilling the New Commandment, learning to love each other the way Jesus loved us.

And we're journeying toward the fulfillment of the Great Commission, where we learn to serve and reach out beyond the walls of our church and our comfort zones so that we can make disciples of every nation!

We are traveling to maturity, to ministry, to impact - and, as a family, we are called to do it together!!

Now, this does not mean that we all do everything together! Families don't do everything together and neither does (or should) the church family. There is a great need for age appropriate activities, for children, for youth, for adults.

Not many teens would get real excited about a marriage seminar, nor would many adults get much of a kick out of some of the wonderful things that pre-schoolers do in Sunday School.

There is a need for special events, seminars, and activities for different sectors of the church family.

BUT, I'm increasingly coming to believe that we should increasingly go out of our way to span the great divide and relate to generations removed from our own.

This idea comes straight from Scripture. Listen to what David says in Psalm 145.

Intergenerational Relating

Worshiping intergenerationally

[Psalm 145:1] A Psalm of Praise, of David.

I will extol You, my God, O King,

And I will bless Your name forever and ever.

[2] Every day I will bless You,

And I will praise Your name forever and ever.

[3] Great is the Lord, and highly to be praised,

And His greatness is unsearchable.

***[4] ONE GENERATION SHALL PRAISE YOUR WORKS TO ANOTHER,
And shall declare Your mighty acts.***

There is something wonderful that happens in the heart of the church and in the heart of every worshipper when Ginny Godsey brings the children's choir to the front to sing a song or two at Christmas or Easter.

Something magic occurs when Chris Addington brings the current iteration of the youth Praise Band to the Worship Center to lead us in worship.

I get positively thrilled when I look over on occasion and see Paul Neel singing a rocking praise song with his hands lifted up high over his head! I am revived when I look over and see the youth, eyes shut and worshipping as we sing a reflective hymn.

We are the family of God - and we **worship** best when we **worship intergenerationally**.

We also **serve** best when we **serve intergenerationally**. I think we could live more like the family God wants us to be if we learned to serve DOWN and to serve UP.

Serving intergenerationally

Serving DOWN

Every Sunday, a group of dedicated adults serves babies and toddlers in our Nurseries. Adults serve pre-schoolers and elementary school aged kids in Sunday School. They serve teens in the youth ministry. That's serving DOWN.

We see serving DOWN every summer when the youth get involved with Vacation Bible School and serve children AND when Tadd leads them as they serve younger children at Basketball Camp. I love it when I see teens working with our AWANA ministry.

But there is room for more and more of this type of ministry.

Imagine if senior citizens caught a vision for serving down and gave themselves to mentoring middle-aged adults in the grace of growing older.

Imagine if middle aged adults got in the habit of taking younger adults out to coffee or over for dinner to discuss career, finances, walking with God, raising a family, marriage struggles - and then told them to persevere and helped them persevere when the challenges come!

That would be an intergenerational, ministering DOWN wonder!

Some months ago, Judy Blake and Regina Ramos led a Sunday afternoon training time for Middle Schoolers who wanted to serve in Children's Ministries.

Now THAT's what I'm talking about! Serving DOWN! Everybody serving the up and coming generation.

Church planter Chad Hall writes, "All in the Family" is now "Grey's Anatomy"¹ - meaning that today's segregation is not by race so much as it is by age.

In Psalm 145, King David envisioned "**one generation praising God's works to another.**" I envision, as well, one generation **servicing** another.

Let your imagination run wild! How could you see yourself ministering DOWN to those who are coming after you? The possibilities are limitless!

And, then, just think about serving UP!

Serving UP

I heard recently about a church where a group of elementary school aged children walk the church building every Saturday, going from room to room, praying for what was going to happen the next day when those rooms were filled with people and activity and ministry.

They are ministering UP.

(The idea is that if we teach a child to SIT when he/she is young, he/she will SIT as an adult! But if we teach a child to SERVE when he/she is young and he/she will SERVE as an adult! Hmm...)

What if we started promoting the vision to believing children - even young children - that they are fully functioning members of the Body of Christ, limited only by age and size and stage?

Couldn't children become involved in prayer, evangelism, service, worship - according to their own abilities?

Youth can minister UP - and have done so! We've had youth painting the homes of adults and cleaning up the yards of the elderly.

Younger adults could look for ways to serve middle-agers and middle-agers could look for ways to shepherd those who are older.

All of this is part and parcel of affirming that we are FAMILY. We relate intergenerationally.

Think about it...

Think about it...

It IS NOT remarkable when we mix well with people like us. (race, economic status, age, etc...)

It IS remarkable when we work well and serve well and love well with those unlike us.

We listen with horror to stories of the caste system of India, a system that erects boundaries to keep people of one class and station of life separate from another.

Well, the church - the FAMILY of God can and should be the one place where an unofficial caste system doesn't exist.

Intergenerationality destroys the caste system and will cause the world to sit up and take notice!

¹ Leadership Journal, Fall, 2006

Here is the vision: That each generation is cheering on the ones ahead and behind.

Brothers and sisters, we are family! And we best demonstrate to a watching world the family-ness of the church when we worship, love and serve together.

Now, with all of this talk about family, it is conceivable that some of you might be concerned that my thought is to make the church a fortress, that we would become an insulated family, separate from a dangerous culture, that we might become ingrown.

Let me assure you that that kind of thinking is the farthest thing from my mind!

In fact, I think that seeing ourselves as FAMILY is one of the most strategic ways to lead us to engaging the culture in which God has placed us.

Ministering as a Family to Families

(A vision for how to reach out)

To Families in Our Church

Obviously, we are a part of the culture in which God has placed us. The church is not divorced from 2008 American culture. The challenges that face families outside the church also face those who are inside the church.

The church could be - should be! - a resource to help families within the church succeed in what God has called them to do.

If I were to ask you, today, *“Whose job is it to disciple children?”* you might think for a minute or two. But I’m confident that after some thought you would respond - *“Parents. It is the responsibility of the mom and dad - and if in a single parent home, the mom or the dad - to disciple the sons and daughters in their home.”*²

² Some examples of family discipling family. Jeremiah mentions the family of the Rechabites, who refused to drink wine, even after Jeremiah told them to do so, because their father, Jehonadab, taught them not to drink wine (see Jeremiah 35). Then, there is Rufus, mentioned in Romans 16, whose father, Simeon, led him to Christ after Simeon carried esus’

I couldn’t agree more!

When Moses wrote to the people of God in the Old Testament, he left spiritual nurture squarely in the lap of the home.

He said, *[Deuteronomy 6:6] These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. [7] You shall teach them diligently to your sons (implied, DAUGHTERS) and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.*

What was true in 1500 BC is restated by Solomon hundreds of years later in Proverbs and is affirmed by the New Testament writings of Paul.

The home is where spiritual nurture HAS to take place!

It is not the church’s role to disciple your kids!

But wouldn’t it be great if the church could supply parents with the resources and the tools and the training necessary to disciple their kids?

I’ve spoken to many parents who would love to *“train up their child in the way she or he should go”* - but are lost when it comes to knowing how to do it.

I see this as the next step in the vision of living like family here: That your church equips you parents (and parents-to-be) with the tools you need to raise your children to follow Jesus.

And then, of course, there are families outside of our church family who could use a little help...

To Families in Our Community

As you well know, in some circles today, *family* is a fighting word.

cross. And Timothy, one of Paul’s chief helps and partners, was led to faith by his grandmother Lois and his mother, Eunice (2 Timothy 2).

Family is on people's minds. Politicians want to win the family vote, and who in the world would ever be against "family values"?

As important as family is, though, there is no question that the whole concept of family is changing in our culture.³

The strictest definition of "a traditional family" (or nuclear family) would be a husband and a wife who had not been previously married to anyone but each other PLUS their children. (maybe their 2.2 children)

In America today, half of all family units are what are termed "non-traditional." I'll bet that at least half of all the families you know are non-traditional.

Throw into the mix the fact that Americans are marrying far later than in the past and that forty-three percent of the adult population of the USA is single, and it is clear that a call to uphold "family values" will be interpreted differently by most everyone who hears and may even be resented by those outside the traditional framework.

That leaves the church, a FAMILY that wants to serve families, needing to think creatively about how to go about it.

Here's a picture of one family. I could have used another for an example, but I've chosen to use this one. I don't know how representative it is. But it is one. This family happens to be mine.

My grandparents on both sides were married for their whole lives and lived as husbands and wives until death separated them. That's not unusual for people who lived in the first half of the twentieth century.

Tracing just the side of my father's family reveals that the four children had a total of eight offspring. I was one of them and I had seven others in my generation.

The stories of the other seven of my generation, with respect to family, are as follows:

- One - married and divorced and suicide - no children;
- Two - Married and now divorced - one grown son;
- Three - married, divorced and now happily remarried to her original husband - two grown children with kids of their own;
- Four - married, divorced twice, now happily married to her third husband - three kids, some grandchildren;
- Five - married, divorced once, widowed once, now remarried - three mostly grown kids;
- Six - married, divorced - two kids;
- Seven - married, suicide/possibly murdered, leaving no family behind?

Now, how would you minister to my family?

With respect to family, my family is a group of strugglers!

Our challenge, as the FAMILY of God, is to help, really help, people and families who are presently outside our FAMILY to come to know our Father.

One of the best ways we can do this, I believe, is to provide resources to people outside of our church to help them with family concerns.

What if we offered the Love and Respect Seminar that we offered this Spring with some regularity and then provided the DVDs to folks in the community?

What if we advertised the wildly successful Family Life Conference (promoted by Campus Crusade for Christ) that comes to San Antonio every year?

What if we offered parenting classes? Offered Dave Ramsey's Financial Peace University more regularly? Provided a support group for single parents? Had seminars on raising blended families, on stepparenting?

There is so much crying need and there is so much that we could do!

And isn't it likely that by serving families - of every variety - we could become "family" to these families and gain an open door to share the love of our Father with them - and see them join our FAMILY?

³ Leadership Journal (published by Christianity Today) put out an issue in the Fall of 2006 focusing on the theme "God's Family." The challenge addressed in article after article was how to re-tool the church to meaningfully serve people whose families have broken the mold of tradition.