

Introduction:

- A. *Illus.*: I recently came across a story from California about this guy, **Jeff Adams**. A few years ago he and his brother took a DNA test and discovered they didn't have the same father. Then there was this woman, **Julie Rogan**, who was an amateur genealogist. She had her DNA tested and, lo and behold, she discovered she was closely related to a guy wearing a USC cap in his online profile photo. Sure enough, they were brother and sister. And not only that, Jeff found out he had another sister, too, **Beth**. Then there was a guy named **Brandon Blaylock**, who knew he'd been adopted in 1957. His daughters got him to get a DNA test and—you guessed it—he was a half-brother to Jeff, Beth and Julie. **These folks all had their own families but then they discovered they had another family first.**

When they finally met, Beth said, *“It was mind-blowing. It’s not six degrees of separation for us, it’s one degree of separation.”*

“It’s really wonderful,” Brandon said of rediscovering his birth family. *“My adoptive parents had passed on, my adoptive brother had passed on. I thought I was a party of one and now I’m a party of 110.”*

<https://www.dailybreeze.com/2018/01/13/family-lost-family-found-a-south-bay-family-discovers-long-lost-brothers-sisters/> By NICK GREEN, *Daily Breeze* 1/13/18

- B. The church is like that. We're made up of people who were "a party of one" who are now part of a big family. Peter wrote, *“You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you*

are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.” 1 Pet 2:9-10

C. But there are two problems that undermine our spiritual family.

1. Many, many Christians in America think, “The most important thing is my personal walk with the Lord.” A recent survey shows that 37% of practicing Christians “prefer to pursue spiritual growth on their own.” Did you know that that is a very difficult idea to find in the Bible? *Illus.:* I told my friend the other day that I need to get out and walk but that I just can’t seem to get motivated. He said, “*You need to get a walking partner.*” Walking with Jesus is like that. **The most important thing is our walk together with the Lord.**
2. The second problem is seeing the church as an organization designed to meet the needs of its paying customers. If we see the church as an organization, we will bring organizational leadership to it; to make it lean and clean (but not mean!). Some of that is necessary, of course, but the church is not primarily an organization. It’s never presented that way in the Bible. **We are not primarily organized around tasks and goals but around environment. And the environment described in Scripture is family; a home.**

Think of all the biblical words and ideas we use: Father, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, bride of Christ, adoption, household of God, Christ as our elder Brother. Think how differently a family works from an organization. The personal attention. Patience. Acceptance of differences, strengths and needs, nurture, teaching, love for one another, and on and on.

D. In the next several weeks we're going to explore how thinking of our church as *home* shapes our various ministries. And I hope that we will deepen your commitment to your brothers and sisters here. Because...

I. THE CHURCH IS OUR HOME, OUR FAMILY. OUR *FIRST* FAMILY.

- A. I'm not talking today about being a *friendly, sociable* congregation. Many Sundays before the service I pray that God would help us to be more than friendly; that we would make friends. Even better would be the prayer, "*Help us to love one another today like brothers and sisters.*"
- B. You've probably noticed, sort of in the back of your mind, how often the New Testament writers speak of us as brothers and sisters. (Technically, the Greek word, *adelphoi*, used in all these cases is masculine, *brothers*. But in most cases, it is clear that the writer is addresses the whole church, not just the men. Thus we use *brothers and sisters.*")

Joseph Hellerman, in his book, *When the Church Was a Family*, shows what a radical thing it was for the early church to address one another as brothers and sisters. No other social group, outside the nuclear family, ever did that. The highest loyalty in that culture was not to oneself, but to one's family. A man's responsibility was greater to his brother than his wife! Then Jesus changed the way we are to think about family itself. Listen to Mark **3:31-35**:

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers!

Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”

If you’re a Christian, your brother and sister and mother are your fellow believers—those who do *God’s will*.” **Let that sink in. These people around you are your first family in Christ.**

- C. The Greek word, *philadelphia*—*brotherly love*—like in **Heb 13:1**, “*Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters,*” packed a punch for the first readers. One commentator put it, “***The New Testament is the only place where the word has been found outside the context of the home. A first century reader would therefore come across it here with a sense of shock; [he] really does mean that Christians should have a quality of relationships which is demonstrably different and satisfying, demanding a high and new loyalty.***” [Lukas & Green, *2nd Peter & Jude*, BST, p.60]
- D. I hope you recall a few weeks ago when I preached on **Eph 2:11-22** where Paul explains Jesus’ death brought Jews and Gentiles together in Christ. “*His purpose was to create in himself one new humanity out of the two.*” **Vv.19-22:** “***Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.***” **Built together! The Bible knows nothing of Christians who are not involved with a family of other believers.** Such Christians are like kids who have run away from home.

II. JESUS TEACHES US THAT IN ORDER TO LOVE *HIM* WE MUST LOVE HIS BROTHERS AND SISTERS

- A. In John 17:20-21, Jesus prayed, *“I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message [that’s us], **that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me.**”* Believers are drawn up into the intimate love of the Trinity and it is that love that stirs our love for one another. Where does that put the Christian who isn’t part of a congregation, who keeps his or her distance from any meaningful Christian relationships?
- B. Jesus said in **Jn 13:34-35**, *“A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.”* And what does that love look like?

Listen to **Col 3:11-17**... [vv.12-13 – notice how self-sacrificing all these qualities are. V.15 – maintain mutual peace “as members of one body”. Our mutual ministry of teaching and singing.]

Heb 10:24-25, *“Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”*

I quote Hellerman again, *“**Spiritual formation occurs primarily in the context of community.** People who remain connected with their brothers and sisters in the local church almost invariably grow in self-understanding, and they mature in their ability to relate in healthy ways to God and to their fellow human beings. This is especially the case for those courageous Christians who stick it out through the often messy process of interpersonal discord and conflict resolution. Long-term interpersonal*

relationships are the crucible of genuine progress in the Christian life. People who stay also grow. People who leave do not grow.” [p.1 *When the Church Was a Family*]

- C. You know how I sing the benediction sometimes where God says to us, “*I will be your home*”? If God is our home we must love his family as our brothers and sisters. They are our first and everlasting family.

There are so many implications of this truth that the church is God’s household, his family. We’ll touch on several of them in the weeks ahead but let me just touch on one more.

Illus.: I read about a remarkable Christian family in West Virginia. **Paul and Jeane Briggs** have 36 children. *36 children!* Thirty-one of them are adopted from the U.S. as well as Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, Bulgaria, and Ghana. Paul and Jeane seek out hard-to-place older and special-needs kids. They adopted the last two in 2015. At that time Jeane said, “*Lots of the kids have asked to sleep in the same room [as those infants]. They are already cherished in the hearts of their siblings here.*”

Not many parents can open their homes so wide but that’s just what churches were born to do. Churches should have that kind of attitude toward the spiritual orphans, outcasts, and outlaws whom God brings to our attention.

III. GOD INTENDS OUR CHURCH HOME TO MAKE ROOM FOR OTHERS

- A. A church consultant told me once that almost every church thinks they’re friendly but he’d found that no matter what size a church is, most of the people there don’t really want it to grow any bigger. Maybe you feel that way. Have you seen those videos of a little girl who finds out she’s going to have a baby sister... and she just starts bawling?! She doesn’t *want* a baby sister!

- B. We are home to prodigal sons and daughters. Remember what it was like in Jesus' story when the prodigal son came home? *"The father said to his servants, 'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'* So they began to celebrate." That's not only a picture of the joy in heaven, but of God's family here.
- C. For many people, of course, home is not a word filled with good memories or healthy connotations. Terrible things happen in families, and in churches, too. **J. D. Vance**, in his bestselling memoir, *Hillbilly Elegy*, writes about a former high school classmate. When she posted on Facebook that *"she had finally found a man who would treat her well (a refrain I'd seen many times before), her thirteen-year-old daughter commented: 'Just stop. I just want you and this to stop.' I wish I could hug that little girl, because I know how she feels. For seven long years, I just wanted it to stop. I didn't care so much about the fighting, the screaming, or even the drugs. I just wanted a home, and I wanted to stay there..."* [pp. 150-151]. God designed the church to be home for people who feel like that. **Psalm 68:5-6** says,

*A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows,
is God in his holy dwelling.*

God sets the lonely in families,

he leads out the prisoners with singing;

Don't you love that phrase, "*God sets the lonely in families*"? **We're one of those families.**

God brings us students from all over the world, some who have left their families behind in order to study here.

He brings us people whose hearts have been broken over things they may not share. There's seldom a Sunday here where tears aren't shed by someone. There are children who could use a grandparent and grandparents who could might like to hold little hands. There are people whose work week leaves them belittled and beleaguered. One of our bywords here is, "*Be kind, for every person you meet is fighting a great battle.*" There are people who walk through our doors who know little of Jesus. There are others hungry for a church family that is authentic, who loves Jesus and his Word, and who will make room for them in this home.

Illus.: Years ago in our church in Pennsylvania I was preaching one morning and I said, with a little touch of drama, "*Somewhere in the Beaver Valley this morning someone woke up who hasn't been in church in years and they said to themselves, 'I need to find a church.'*" And a guy in the front row shouted out, "*Here I am!*"

Talk to your brothers and sisters. Talk to folks you don't know. Give your heart to your brothers and sisters. Regard others above yourself. Pray when we send out prayer requests. Get involved in a small group. Serve others even when it is inconvenient. Exercise your spiritual gifts. Have some folks over or take someone out to a meal. Be a friend.

Illus.: There's a story from the life of this church before my time that I want you to hear every once in awhile. In the late '90s, a man named Jim came to church here at VCL. No one knows how he found his way here. He was a Vietnam vet, wounded in mind and heart, who lived alone in near poverty in a trailer in Lake Bluff. He drank too much and didn't take very good care of himself. In fact,

because of his drinking and everything he was puffy and bloated, and not very appealing. But he showed up in church. And that posed a problem, of course because he made folks uncomfortable. I'd have felt the same way.

But the pastor at the time—another Pastor Lee—welcomed him. That Pastor Lee and his wife Joyce had Jim for dinner. So did Don and Nancy Molinari. Jim became a Christian. Don gave him a Bible. Jim would come and just sit here alone in this sanctuary because he felt peaceful. He sat around a campfire one night till 3 a.m. listening in amazement to Christians tell their stories.

Eventually, Jim volunteered to cut the grass and take care of flowers around here. Problem was, he would do it on Sunday morning before church, and then come into church in his cut-offs, smelling of alcohol and grass and gasoline. He was a challenge and he never really got his life all put together. But people here welcomed him. This congregation became his home. I suppose he could've said what that guy in my first story said when he found his family, *"I thought I was a party of one and now I'm a party of 110."*

Jim died about three years later. Don found him in his trailer. And now that humble, blessed brother waits for his family, his white robe, and the Wedding Supper of the Lamb.

Always remember: our church is home.