

Family Value: Deep Caring

Scripture: Colossians 3:12-17; John 21:15-17

Sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Leslie R. Stacks at the First Presbyterian Church of Wadesboro.

I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.ⁱ

That is from a letter written in the First Century A.D. to the Christians living in the Roman-controlled town of Ephesus. It is easy to hear these words as applying to a church — to a group of people related not by blood, marriage, or adoption, but by their identity as followers of Christ. But, throughout this letter we find “family language” — references to family, children, and households. As the letter begins, the author tells us that God “destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.”ⁱⁱ A little further on, we hear that we “are no longer strangers and aliens, but ... members of the household of God.”ⁱⁱⁱ Still later in the letter we find advice for living together within our earthly households — advice about care and devotion between spouses, and about the relationship between adults and children.

This letter was written to Christians and their families nearly 2,000 years ago. What do our families look like now? According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011 this country had over 132 million households. Over one-fourth (28%) of those households contained just one person, with the remaining households being what the Census Bureau calls Family Households. About half of all Family Households included children under 18. Of the 74.6 million children younger than 18 in 2011, most (69%) lived with two parents, which is down from 77% in 1980. Another 27% of children under age 18 lived with one parent, and 4% did not live with either of their parents. Of those children who did live with two parents, 92% lived with two biological or two adoptive parents.

Today we start our 3-week series on *Family Values*. We will be focusing upon a very special arena for Christian mission: our own homes. Within this congregation, we have most if not all of the family types recognized by the U.S. Census Bureau. And, as the words of Ephesians remind us, every one of our families “takes its name” — takes its identity and its status within the universe — from God, the one Father of us all. That identity will be our foundation for pondering how we can help all of the members of our households be “strengthened in [their] inner being with power through [God’s] Spirit.” How we can help the members of our households be “rooted and grounded in love” with the goal that all of us might “have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God.” That is the God-given purpose of a family, of a household: to be a nurturing environment in which its members come to know the love of God and can grow in the image of Christ.

To begin, we look at our First Lesson. It is a passage we have read before and includes one of the apostle Paul’s favorite metaphors. Paul often compared becoming a Christian with taking off something old and putting on something new. In this passage, Paul talks about putting on “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience” — qualities and attitudes befitting followers of Christ. “Clothe yourselves in love,” Paul writes, because love is what binds us together in harmony. “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts,” he writes, and “be thankful.” Paul tells us we need to “let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly” and to “teach and admonish one another in all wisdom.” He advises us to “sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” Again, it is easy to hear all of this advice as applying to a church, but it also applies to life within our families, our households — giving us some guidelines about the care and devotion we can show to each other and about the relationship we can foster between adults and children. Within our households, just as in our life as the church, we need to develop compassion and patience. We need to share an unselfish affection. And, we need to learn ways of promoting peace and giving thanks. In other words, within our individual households we need to actively exhibit and promote the “family values” that Jesus preached and lived while he was on earth.

First and foremost among those family values is putting God first, before any and every other thing.

That is a topic of our Second Lesson. This passage comes at the very end of the Gospel of John. The crucifixion has already taken place, and the resurrected Christ has come to meet with his disciples by the Sea of Tiberias. The disciples have been fishing all night without catching a single fish. When their resurrected Lord first walks up, they do not recognize him — not until he shows them where to toss their nets. Then, they catch so many fish they have trouble hauling them in. Once they do, they all share a breakfast of bread and fish, which is where our passage begins:

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my lambs.” A second time he said to him, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” He said to him, “Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Tend my sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon son of John, do you love me?” Peter felt hurt because he said to him the third time, “Do you love me?” And he said to him, “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.” Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.”

This passage brings back to mind the remark by Mark Twain that, “Many people are bothered by those passages in Scripture which they cannot understand; but as for me, I always noticed that the passages in Scripture which trouble me most are those which I do understand.” For centuries, people have tried to make this passage seem very complicated, when its meaning is really quite plain. Indeed, the point is clearly stated not one time, not two times, but three times. Three times the risen Christ asks Peter, “Do you love me?” Three times Peter responds, “Yes Lord; you know that I love you.” And, three times, the risen Christ draws the simple, straightforward conclusion: “Peter, if you love me, then you will take care of my sheep.” The meaning for you and me is equally plain: If you and I love Christ, then we will take care of his sheep. All of his sheep. Even the sheep we do not like. Even the sheep who do not show us any gratitude. Even the sheep who do not like the kind of care we are giving and wish we would just leave them alone.

Not hard to see how this applies within a family, is it? There are times when you and I do not like all of the sheep in our households. Times when those other sheep show us no gratitude at all. And, those of us who have been in the position of being rams and ewes know what it is like when one of the lambs does not like the kind of care we are giving and wants to go live in another flock. But, no matter what, the command remains, “Feed my lambs; take care of my sheep.” Care for each other so deeply and so well that everyone is able to feel trust, that everyone can develop a healthy sort of dependence — and everyone can learn what it means to be depended upon. Again, that is the God-given purpose of a family, of a household: to be a nurturing environment in which we come to know the love of God and can grow in the image of Christ. The gift of family is the gift of people who care for us and who teach us how to care. But if the only thing you and I learn within our families is how to care for each other — for our relatives and the other members of our household — then the lesson is incomplete. Our education has stopped short. Our education has stopped short of teaching us how to love our neighbors as ourselves — how to care for the people outside our families as much and as well as we care for the people within. Because, that is the command. That is the privilege. Christ has entrusted you and me with the privilege of taking care of his sheep — all of them; not just the ones to whom we are related.

How can you and I, in our various families and households, fulfill this command? How can we create nurturing environments in which the members of our households can come to know the love of God and grow in the image of Christ? In coming weeks, we will be discussing several ideas, but this being Souper Bowl Sunday and the day we receive the \$2-Per-Family Mission Fund Offering, we will talk about the issue of hunger and how we might respond. The latest figures show that about 49 million people in the United States are food insecure, which means they have limited or uncertain access to adequate food.^{iv} This is the highest number ever recorded in our nation, and North Carolina is among the 5 states with the highest rates of food insecurity.^v When you and I donate our food and money today, we are making a direct effort to reach out to our neighbors and help ease their fear that tomorrow there might not be enough food in their homes. We also are helping ourselves and the members of our households better understand the role we can play — the role we are called to play — in sharing the love and blessings of God with all of his children.

Later this month, we will receive the 10¢-Per-Meal Hunger Offering. Ten cents per meal, times three meals a day, times seven days a week, times 52 weeks in a year, equals \$109.50 Our Presbytery and our Session urge each of us to contribute at least that amount to the 10¢-Per-Meal Hunger Program over the course of a year, as a way of living out Christ’s command for us to take care of his sheep. One purpose is to

raise money so we can help end hunger for people in and around our Presbytery. Another purpose of this program is to provide a way, within each household, for us to learn how to take care of others. It is wonderful when one of us contributes \$9 or more to the 10¢-Per-Meal offering each month. But, something more takes place when we actually give 10¢ per meal. When we keep a container on the dinner table or the kitchen counter, and each member of the household puts in his or her 10¢ contribution before beginning to eat. When we do not feed ourselves until we have paused to help feed someone else.

The Souper Bowl of Caring, the \$2-Per-Family Mission Fund, the 10¢-Per-Meal Hunger Offering — it is in such practical acts of love that you and I develop within ourselves and those around us the family value that Christ espoused when he told us to take care of his sheep. It is the value of caring as deeply for all the rest of God's children as God has cared for us. *Amen.*

i Ephesians 3:14b-19

ii Ephesians 1:5

iii Ephesians 2:19

iv Source: <http://www.ers.usda.gov/briefing/foodsecurity/labels.htm>

v The five states with the highest levels of food insecure households are Texas, Arkansas, Mississippi, Georgia, and North Carolina. Source: <http://maps.ers.usda.gov/FoodAtlas/>