

THE RECOVERY OF FAMILY

John 10:31-35

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When God made you and God made me, He made us a part of a family. He gave us grandmas, grandpas, sisters, brothers, aunts and uncles and lots of others. He gave us mothers and fathers, congregations and communities. He even challenged us to live in love and unity. When God made you and God made me, He made us a part of a family. On this Mother's Day, I'd like to paint a picture of Church and home combined, for the benefit and good of human kind.

Whether your family is traditionally parented or single parented, blended together or blown apart, connected by blood or by belief, **there remains behind the closed doors of our individual lives a common need. It is the need to love and to be loved.** After all, this commandment of Jesus in the 13th chapter of John is none other than the hunger of every human soul. "Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you must love one another."

The sermon today is really composed of two questions and the first is this: **How is the church that meets at your house doing?** The shortest book in the New Testament is a little letter from Paul, a prisoner for Jesus Christ, to Philemon, a businessman from Colossae. It's a letter about a family matter. It has to do with a runaway slave by the name of Onesimus. In it, Paul urges Philemon to take Onesimus back into the family, not as a slave but as a brother. Paul opens that letter by making reference to "the church that meets at your house." It's one of those phrases that keeps coming back to me again and again: "the church that meets at your house."

I'd like to apply that today in a very personal way. You see, divine service takes place at your residence on a daily basis. Christian education happens in your home by the hour. More prayers are prayed from your bedroom than will ever be prayed in this room. Discipleship is hammered out on the anvil of daily habits. How's the church at your house doing? Is God worshiped in your home?

It's Mother's Day. The first Mother's Day observance was held May 10, 1908, at Andrews Methodist Church, Grafton, West Virginia. Ann Reeves Jarvis taught Sunday school there for thirty years. Three years after her death, her daughters asked for a special Sunday morning service in her honor. By 1914, President Woodrow Wilson had assigned the second Sunday of May as a day of national observance in honor of mothers. It is the second busiest day of the year for the telephone company. Call your mother if you have one to call today, but don't worship your mother -- her feet are made of clay. Are you worshiping God at your house?

A bride was unusually nervous on her wedding day. Her pastor assured her things would be ok. "In fact," he said, "I'll give you a couple of hints. When you start down the aisle on your wedding day, you just concentrate on that aisle. You've walked down it hundreds of times. When you get about half way down the aisle, you'll see the altar. It's the place where you were confirmed and it's the place where you were baptized. Just concentrate on the altar. When you get about three-fourths of the way down the aisle, you'll be able to see the eyes of your future husband, the one to whom you are going to commit yourself for the rest of your life. Just concentrate on him."

Everything went extremely well at her wedding, just like clockwork, no mistake anywhere; except people on the inside pews kept wondering why the bride kept saying, "Aisle, altar,

him; aisle, altar, him; aisle, altar, him.” Don’t worship your spouse. It won’t work, it really won’t. You see, a great marriage is not two people gazing into each other’s eyes singing, “*You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.*” A great marriage is two people who have joined hands with one another and are looking into the eyes of Jesus the Christ who is the Author and Finisher of our faith. Is God worshiped at your house?

Don’t ask your children to be perfect. They can’t fulfill all your dreams. Not even grandchildren are gods – close, but not quite. Teenagers, you’re right, your parents aren’t perfect and that’s what scares them the most, day after day. I think my Mom had it figured out. It was on a tiny little plaque that hung in the back corner of a room in that little house where I was raised. It said this: **Christ is the Head of this house.** You make Christ the Head of your house and it will be a great relief to everybody else who is trying to live there. How’s the church at your house? Are people loved at that place?

Love stoops to serve. Jesus said it plainly, “Love one another,” and then He demonstrated it dramatically in this 13th chapter of John. The setting for the commandment is the Upper Room. It’s the last supper. Competition is in the room everywhere. James and John are jockeying for position. Peter is overconfident that he is going to be chosen the favorite one. Judas is counting money. The betrayal is coming. They are so caught up in their own world that they forget to provide a very basic element of hospitality. There is no slave present to wash people’s feet. So after the meal, Jesus rises from the table, takes a towel and a basin and begins to wash His disciples’ feet. Nobody stands taller than when they stoop to serve. Who are the people who have washed your feet, your hands, your back, and your bottom? Are you grateful for them?

In *The Tennessean* yesterday, Tim Chavez said, “More than

four decades ago, my mother buttered my bread with Oleo margarine at every meal. On Tuesday, I started doing it for her. Though I do not remember it, my mother was there to take my hand and guide me to the bathroom. Five days ago I started doing the same for her. She was once the one who was there telling me to put one foot out and step, then the other foot and to take another step. It was her firm hand under my arm that told me I wouldn't fall. And this week, I held her hand as she took the first step again and we began a new relationship as she adjusted to the cruelty of a stroke." Nobody stands taller than when they stoop to serve. Love knows how to serve.

Love rises to forgive. Yes, love does mean having to say you are sorry. Yes, love does mean owning up to your mistakes. If you say it often, you children will learn it quicker.

The snow was on the ground when we moved from Louisville, Kentucky, to Lexington, Kentucky, in 1984. But the cold outside was mild compared to the cold shoulder that our oldest son, Wes, decided to demonstrate over that particular move. For six months, the coldness persisted and then finally one night, the hurt erupted. "Those people up at church," he said to me, "they think you're God but they don't have to live with you like I do. I know the real you. I hate church. I hate life. I hate being here. I hate everything about everything." And after he had vented for a long time, for the first time in months, he let me gather him up in my arms and together we cried for the hurt that was in both of our hearts. We prayed to God for the courage to carry on. Today Wes has committed himself to Christian ministry. Love knows how to forgive. How's the church that meets at your house? How's it doing?

Then I want to raise a second question with you today. **How can the Church help you and your family?** I know, Sunday after Sunday, month after month, year after year, we find our way to this beautiful place to worship. We ask you to do

more, work more, give more, sacrifice more, extend more and try harder. We say it every week, week after week, month after month, year after year. Today I want to change the question. How can we help you? What can we do to support you in the biggest job that you have?

One biblical image of the Church is family, the family of Christ. When Jesus had gained some notoriety, His brothers and His mother came to see Him. They said, "It's time for You to come on back home and tend to the carpenter shop." Jesus said a shocking thing that day. Do you remember what it was? Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My brother, My sister, and My mother." On another occasion, Jesus said, "Let the little children come to Me and do not hinder them for to such belongs the kingdom of God." You'll learn more from the children than you will learn from the preacher at church. Even dying on a cross, Jesus takes time out from saving the world to address His mother and His disciple, John, and connect them in a relationship that would see them through the days and the years yet to come. We have good reasons to greet one another in the Church as brother and sister, father and mother. That's what Church is about. How can we help you?

You see, **Church is a place to belong.** If it's anything, it is a place to belong. Swiss psychiatrist, Paul Tournier used to say all of us are in search for a place, a place to be. It is the core search of humanity. I want to say to you that Church is a good place to be. You belong here.

It's graduation time across the country. I've been on a commencement circuit the last couple of weeks. I went to three on Friday at Vanderbilt, trying to find the one to which I was invited. I got to the right one in time to hear Richard Percy. In a speech to post graduates in education on the Peabody campus, he noted that the lack of connectedness is the single factor common to all of the teenagers who have

carried guns to school and started shooting their peers. Do you understand?

We were not created for isolation. We were not made to live in our little corners. We were created for community. We belong to one another and our hope for survival as the people of earth is that we rediscover community, expressed often in the Church as family. You belong at this place, not for your needs alone. You belong for the sake of others who sit in the pews around you, and some who have yet to be in this church. You belong in this place!

Church is a place of people who care. It's not a building, it's not a steeple, the Church is people. On Mother's Day, I think about my own mother but I think about a lot of other people who played the mother-role for me through these fifty-five years. For example, I think about Kathryn who attended the little student church right outside of Bardstown, Kentucky. Sandi and I, while still teenagers, went to be their pastor. She raised the most amazing chickens I had ever seen. They were chickens that laid eggs wrapped in ten-dollar bills. I've been trying to get the genes so I can reproduce them! At least that's the way the eggs showed up to us one Sunday morning at our front door. She was like a mother to me.

I think about Ida Mae. I think about the way she took this country kid and saw some gold down in his soul that was worth mining; how she taught me some social skills; how she sent me to England on the first trip I had ever taken out of the state of Kentucky. I'll never forget her. I visited her on her deathbed and I said to her, "Ida Mae, I just want to say one more time on this side of the grave, how grateful I am for the investment you made in my life."

I think about Annie Laurie Jenkins. When I went to be her pastor, she met me at the door the first Sunday. She handed me the church bulletin. Written all over it were all the

grammatical errors I had made leading that worship service. I hated it. But I was smart enough to know down in my soul that I needed it. And so I said to her, in her own embarrassment, please don't stop doing that. For nine years, every Sunday, she walked out of the congregation and handed me the grammatically corrected Sunday morning worship service. She was like a mother to me. I went back to do her funeral. I talked about the investment she had made in my life.

Do you understand what I am saying? We have lots of mommas; we have lots of daddies; we have lots of brothers and lots of sisters and friends and people who are like family to us. They're not blood kin, but in many cases, they are closer than those who are kin to us in that way. I'm saying to you today that if the Church could give that to me, why can't we give that to the world? Why can't we have the mentors and the role models, the spiritual guides, the counselors and the friends who, through life, will be near us? Why can't the Church do that for the world? Let us be the fathers and mothers, sisters and brothers, teachers and friends, ministers and mentors who will meet the needs of those committed to our care that the Kingdom may come on earth.

How can we help you and your family? Can we create the networks of support that are going to make the difference in the world? What if we said to every couple that comes to this beautiful place to be married, "Yes, we are interested in you having a nice wedding, but we're interested in a lot more. We want to help you have a great marriage. We are going to fight for you, teach you and help you every step of the way."

What if we said to parents who presented their children here on Sunday morning, "This is not just a ritual we say about being a community of faith." What if we put it in practice and said, "We're going to help you learn to be the best parent that you can possibly be. We're not going to let you fail at that job."

What if we said to divorced and single persons, "There is a safe place here for you, a place of belonging, you're not a second-class citizen." And then we went out to make sure – to make very, very sure that it took place. What if we asked the school systems of this county to send us your tired and your troubled kids that can't get along anywhere else? Send them to us!

What if this Elizabeth project that you read about in our newspaper the other day, was not just one project but an ongoing ministry of this congregation. Young teenage mothers-to-be need somebody who knows the ropes to begin to help them, teach them, nurture them, and mentor them in the business of being mothers. Fathers need that too. Isn't that what the Church is all about? What if we said to every widow and widower, "You'll never walk this valley alone, that when you walk through the valleys of the shadow of death, we will be beside you all the way, as long as it takes."

If boxers have a right to have somebody in their corner to wipe off the sweat, dry the blood, and encourage them to go back for another round, isn't it right that every human being, every man and woman and boy and girl in the world, have somebody in their corner? And isn't it the business of the Church to make sure that happens?

You see, I have a prayer today that the Church and the home may create a partnership that will turn this ship around and restore us, all of us, to sanity.

Welcome home! You belong here! Amen!