

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, May 13, 2018 – Christian Family Sunday

Hymns: 700 – Praise Our Maker; 553 – May The Lord Bless You; 425 - We Praise You, O God; We are one in the bond of love; 472 – We are God’s People

Scriptures: Matthew 12:46-50; Galatians 6:9-10; 1 John 3:1-2

Sermon Title: “Being God’s Family” – Rev. Douglas Rollwage

Matthew 12:46-50 (New Living Translation)

As Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. Someone told Jesus, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you.”

Jesus asked, “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” Then he pointed to his disciples and said, “Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!”

Galatians 6:9-10 (NLT)

So let’s not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing 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.

1 John 3:1-2 New Living Translation (NLT)

See how very much our Father loves us, for he calls us his children, and that is what we are! But the people who belong to this world don’t recognize that we are God’s children because they don’t know him. Dear friends, we are already God’s children, but he has not yet shown us what we will be like when Christ appears. But we do know that we will be like him, for we will see him as he really is.

I wish we knew more about Jesus’ family life, about his days growing up in Nazareth as the carpenter’s son. I want to know how he got along with his brothers and sisters and the other village children, how he did in school, whether people noticed something different about him. As he grew older, I want to know how he helped Joseph in the family business, whether they had enough work in tiny Nazareth or whether they travelled to nearby boom-town Sepphoris to work their trade.

We’re not even sure if Jesus’ brothers and sisters, mentioned in the New Testament numerous times, were stepchildren from a previous marriage of Joseph’s (as the Orthodox and Catholics believe), or if they were children of Joseph and Mary, born after Jesus. We don’t know when Joseph himself died; was Jesus in his teens, his twenties? We do know that by the time Jesus is actively engaged in ministry, the family was no longer as close as once it was. Perhaps the others were stepchildren, and when Joseph, the glue which held the family together, died, there was an inevitable drifting apart. By the time Jesus was facing his own death on the cross, he

entrusted Mary to his friend John, implying that his family no longer considered her their responsibility. John himself tells us that Jesus' brothers didn't believe in him. In time, though, they came around. A Resurrection will do that.

It's fair to say, though, that like many of our own families, Jesus' own family was complicated, and not without its problems. And so maybe it isn't surprising that when he was asked about family, Jesus redefines what family is all about. Told that his mother and brothers and sisters were outside a house in which Jesus was speaking, and were asking for him, he looked around the room at his followers and said, *"Who is my mother? Who are my brothers? Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."*

With that one phrase, Jesus redefines family, and extends his own understanding of family to include all those who do God's will. Jesus looks at us – looks at you – and says, *"Brother. Sister. Mother. Anyone who does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."* And how do we do God's will? According to the Apostle Paul (who was disowned by his own family upon his conversion, yet who found a new family in Christ), here is what it means to do God's will, here is the defining characteristic of the Family of God: *"Let us not become weary in doing good... let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers"* (Galatians 6:9-10).

We become part of God's family by obeying God, and we obey God by doing good to all people. To all people! Every person we meet, we should take a moment to think, "How can I do good to this person?" How can I help them be thankful – to be closer - to God?

That's easy to say, but it is hard to do good to all people. There are times when we're not even particularly nice to other people, let alone good. Does that mean we're not part of God's family? Can we belong to the family of God, even when we have trouble always doing Gods will?

Well, you know what? Even though (hard to believe though this is) I wasn't always a perfect child, even though I didn't always follow our family rules, even though I was a frequent disappointment to my mother and father, and a pain in the neck to my sister and brother, I never stopped being part of my family. Why? Because they never stopped loving me. More than simply following rules, it was love which made our family what it was, and keeps us a family today. Even when my sister thinks I'm an idiot!

It is the same with God's family. Listen to what Jesus' friend John says (1 John 3:1-2): *Think how much the Father loves us. He loves us so much that he lets us be called his children, as we truly are. My dear friends, we are already God's children...*

So, you see, we are part of God's family because God loves us so much - so much that he calls us his children. He's adopted us. Called us his own. "Written our name," says Isaiah (49:16) on the palm of his hand. And so we do God's will, doing good to one another and to all people, loving one another as God has loved us, as a way of celebrating being part of that family. It is our way of saying "Thanks" to God, for all God's love to us and to all the world. And when we reach out to one another and to all our world in kindness and in love, it reminds people that God loves them, and encourages them to be a part of God's family too. And so the family grows.

There's a curious part of the brief passage we read earlier from the Apostle Paul, though. He says to his friends in Galatia: *"Let us not become weary in doing good... let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."* Why does he say, *"especially to those who belong to the family of believers?"* Well, several reasons.

First of all, this is where we learn, develop and practice the skills of doing good. This church family, just like the families into which we are born, is composed of people who are like us, and people who are not like us. People who share our tastes, and people who have a completely different set of likes and dislikes and preferences. Just like family. In my own family, my brother and sister and I have very different personalities, preferences, and priorities. Sometimes we have to make a real effort to find common ground when we get together. Sometimes we have to make a real effort just to get along. And that's not even bringing in-laws into the discussion. But nevertheless, we're family. We're all in the same boat together.

That's the challenge my family faces. Yours too, I'll bet. And now just think: this is your family too: your faith family! Look around: just imagine how many different personalities, preferences, and priorities are represented among those of us here today. Imagine the differing backgrounds, histories, personal struggles, successes, failures, sorrows and joys. But we, says Jesus, are family. We too are all in the same boat together. It is no coincidence that the symbol of the World Council of Churches – now, there's a group of different folks if ever there was one – the symbol of the World Council of Churches, of which the Presbyterian Church is but one small part, is a boat. Our boat. Our ark of faith.

Given our many differences, we can't on a global church scale possibly find our sense of unity and purpose on the basis of shared taste or preferences or even politics. There is only one common element which draws us together as God's worldwide family, and that is our love for God, and our desire to live in a way that honours God, and expresses gratitude to God for all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ. And that's every bit as true on the local scale as well. That's what unites us, that's what brings us together, right here at Zion Presbyterian Church.

Every person here is a part of God's family every bit as much as you are – and Jesus calls us to get along. More than that, he calls us to meet together, to work together, pool our resources, to support one another, to forgive one another – in short, to love one another. And while doing it, to get along. And let's face it, if you can get along with me, you can get along with anybody. And when we as a church are getting along – and not only getting along, but actively seeking ways to bless and do good to one another – then will we be the church that God would have us be, drawing people in who, like us, are hungry for love, and finding here a community committed to loving one another.

Jesus knew this. That's why he chose a group of disciples who would have to learn how to get along, to quite literally “be in the same boat together?” Do you think Matthew and Peter got along? Peter who worked hard to make a living, and tax collector Matthew, determined to bleed him dry? Or how about the disciple known as Simon the Zealot – a political party dedicated to the death of all Romans, and to those who supported the Occupation – do you think he was the kind of guy easy to get along with?

Or Paul, with his churches a volatile mixture of Gentile and Jew, slave and free; the majority of his letters are spent desperately trying to help people simply get along with each other, trying to bind a family together with words of patience, forgiveness and love.

This, for instance, is precisely why the New Testament gets so excited about Gossip. Ranks it right up there with murder. Just listen to what the Apostle Paul is afraid he's going to find when he visits a congregation he began some years before (2 Corinthians 12:20): *For I am afraid that when I come I may not find you as I want you to be, and you may not find me as you want me to be. I fear that there may be discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, slander, gossip, arrogance and disorder.* This list is composed entirely of things which are an offense to the unity of the body of the church, and which lead to division.

Like gossip, which Paul categorizes elsewhere together with wickedness, evil, greed and depravity, envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. Why is gossip so deadly? Because it is an offence against love. Saying malicious or unkind things about our fellow Christians, our church family kills that sense of family, that sense of love. Kills it dead. An unkind word about a fellow Christian can undo years of good. And speaking unkindly about your church family to someone outside of the church guarantees – guarantees – that you will never see that person here, when they're at a place in life when they are looking to find God's love. When you speak about one another, always do so in a way that builds up, and never tears down. Speak to your brothers and sisters with love. Speak about your brothers and sisters with love.

When we are the kind of church that actively seeks to do good and speak well of one another – a true church family – then we will be a church where others want to be, a church that is filled with the irresistible combination of belonging and love. A sense of belonging, a sense of love – who isn't looking for that? Who doesn't want that? Who wouldn't want to be a part of that? And it all starts here. It all starts with us actively seeking ways to do good, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. It is our starting point. It's our training ground. It's where we learn not only how to express the love of God to others, but how to share God's love with those who are different, in order to make a difference. Just like our biological family: this is where we get our start. This is where we learn.

But we don't stop here. We may learn and grow within our family, but we'll never really grow up unless we get out of the house and interact with others. Following Jesus' strong teaching and example, Paul says, "*Let us do good to all people.*" Yes, we practice and learn and develop our sense of family here, but it is when we reach out beyond these doors and extend our determination to do good, to be a blessing, to all people, well, then we will truly begin to experience what it is to be the church. Then we are not just the family of God; then we are truly the body of Christ, the hands and feet of Christ, going to where need exists, reaching out to meet those needs, being the touch and word and presence of Christ to our hurting and needy world. "We shall be like him," said John, in his letter we earlier read; and we can be like him, even now, as we reach out to one another and to our world in his name.

This morning, we celebrated the baptism of little Henry, the son of Stephanie and John Lanoix. Stephanie and John declared their faith and their intention to raise Henry in the knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ within the fellowship of his Church, so that Henry will grow into the faith his parents share, and will come to embrace it as his own.

And we together promised, on behalf of the church of Jesus Christ, to “guide and nurture Henry and his family, by example and counsel, with love and in prayer, encouraging them to follow the way of Christ and to be faithful members of his church, as far as we are able.” In effect, we promised to be Henry’s faith family; to set for Henry, together with his parents, the example of how to love one another, and how to share that love with the world. It is an important thing to promise, for the way in which we live out our love among one another and in our world, will let Henry know if we really mean it; if we really understand what being the Family of God is all about. Henry will be watching. It will be from us that he will learn how to be a brother and sister of Jesus.

"Here are my mother and my brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!" You are the brothers, the sisters, the mothers of Christ. I’m thankful that God has made me a part of his family, and that he’s made you a part of that family too. Of this family. May God help each one of us, young and old, say “Thanks” to God, by doing good to all people, by sharing the gift of God’s love, by being a family – God’s family – together. Amen.