

"We Are Family.... Whether You Like It or Not"

Genesis 4:1-16; I John 3:11-17

Rev. Melissa Hatfield

Sunday, January 17, 2010

There is something about our culture that loves families with problems and issues. Think about some of the most popular family TV shows over the years. All In the Family/Mama's House/Family Guy/Everyone Loves Raymond/Modern Family. And think about popular soap operas. How many issues can one family have and how many times can you marry your half-brother or step-dad or nanny?

Why are dysfunctional families such popular entertainment for Americans? Maybe we can relate and it feels good to know we aren't alone. Maybe it makes us feel better about our own family knowing it could be a lot worse. Maybe laughter keeps us from killing one another over the Christmas holiday.

Family issues aren't new as our part of our text bears witness to this morning. The first known murder among humans is between brothers. Cain and Abel. A murder fueled by jealousy and insecurity. A death of a brother who found favor by the hand of brother who felt threatened and opened the door to sin.

The church is a family as well. And sometimes I think we would make a very popular sitcom or soap opera. Sometimes when I'm having a conversation with someone or in a committee meeting, I'll here some dramatic soap opera music in my head and I want to turn and look dramatically into an imaginary camera.

I have to admit that sometimes I get pretty frustrated with the church. Frustrated by things we get upset over, things we spend money on, things that occupy our time, our budgets, and our hearts. I'm critical over the speed with which change happens and the resistance that is present to people or ideas that are too different from one's own preferences. I'm done with romanticizing and longing for the "good ole' days" while doing our best to avoid the present and the future.

So, no one was more surprised than me to find myself defending the church on a recent trip to Uganda. At the end of November, I spent a week in Kenya and a week in Uganda visiting friends and some of our mission partners. I traveled to Uganda to spend a week with Kristen Vogel, a member here, a former youth, and a young woman who has lived and served in Uganda for two and a half years. Her work with the HALO organization has her overseeing three orphanages in Kenya, three homes in Uganda and one in India. She loves these kids, day in and day out, and puts up with a lot of stuff because of her love for Christ. During the week I was with Kristen, I met many of her friends that are also in their mid/late-twenties, working and serving in Uganda out of their faith and out of their love for Jesus Christ. But one thing they didn't have a lot of love for was the church.

In discovering I was a pastor, the conversation often turned to the church. A popular question was concerning how I manage to serve in a church for so long - the implied question being how have you manage to serve at a church for so long when you seem to be committed to actually doing something for others because of your faith? Most expressed frustration, disappointment, and even anger, at what they view as the irrelevancy and the complacency of the church – and these are young people that grew up in the church. As one young lady expressed,

"For me, GOING to church (that building with a steeple on Sundays) has very little to do with my faith. It's my day-to-day relationships that make me grow in Christ. Church and sermons sometimes add to that, but are by no means a crucial part. It's like that quote (I forget who says it): "We should stop GOING to church and start BEING the church." In my opinion, this is the biggest weakness of many Christians - they do little for Christ outside of one particular building on one day of the week."

Ouch. I wasn't surprised by these reactions. In fact, I understood them and have wrestled with them myself. But it was like the old expression; "Nobody talks bad about my family but me." So there I was, sitting on a rooftop in Kampala, listening to myself defend the church with one of the few things that has encouraged my faithfulness to her – the truth that we are family....whether we like it or not. Sometimes we misunderstand one another; sometimes we let each other down; sometimes we push each other's buttons – but we're family.

I suggested to them that I'm sure they had a least one family member who probably didn't "get" why they moved to Africa to live and work but they didn't just kick them out of the family or decide to never speak to them again. Instead, they focused on the fact that they were family rather than focusing on what they didn't agree on. I encouraged them to be open to the idea that there was still much to be learned from one another and that love for God is expressed in many ways – many of which no one sees but God and the individual expressing his or her love. I've learned that repeatedly around here. And most importantly, that none of us is perfect. And I reminded myself of this as well. We would be rash, arrogant, and judgmental to just cast family aside without listening to their heart and understanding their journey.

But since we are talking about relationships, it is a two-way street, right? And that means we, the church, need to listen to the heart of these believers in our family and understand their journey, too.

Nothing rings more true to them than the words of I John 3:17 – "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" Basically – talk is cheap. There are a growing number of believers; many are young but not all, who have no interest in just sitting around and talking about Jesus. They want to experience Jesus. They don't want to go to church. They want to **be** the church. When they see a church that is more content to protect their Sunday and Wednesday programs for the sake of tradition rather than helping brothers or sisters in need, well, that is a church they do not want to call family.

And it isn't only believers that notice the power of the church "being" the church rather than "going" to church. The world notices as well. The church is at its best when it responds to crises. Whether you are talking about First Baptist in the aftermath of a destructive fire in this very sanctuary twenty-three years ago. Or whether you are talking about the larger church in the wake of a devastating earthquake in Haiti. The church is most like the bride of Christ when there is a crisis that makes us drop our petty differences and reach out in one heart, one love.

Why must it take a crisis? What can't it be enough to know that this world needs God's love desperately and we demonstrate it best when we love one another? When we live and love like the family we are called to be.

Tomorrow we will celebrate the birthday of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who, throughout the civil rights movement, repeatedly challenged the American church to stand up for her family.

In response to some **pastors** who had called King's non-violent protests against racism as "unwise and untimely", King wrote them a letter from his Birmingham jail cell on April 16, 1963, saying, in part,

"... I am in Birmingham because injustice is here. Moreover, I am cognizant of the interrelatedness of all communities and states. I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. "

A single garment of destiny. A family quilt, so to speak, woven together by the love and grace of Christ that makes us family. This quilt, this network of mutuality, should blanket the world with the Kingdom of God. But in our divisiveness and family squabbles it is ripped – leaving gapping holes where the world is exposed to the elements of evil. Sin is lurking at the door, and like Cain, we let it in and it kills the family.

My family, we need to be a part of mending this garment. We need to lay down our differences, our preferences, and our lives and pick up the family quilt. We need to blanket the world with the love of God and we cannot do that when we are at odds with our brothers and sisters over how to hold the quilt, who gets to hold the quilt, what to sing while we hold the quilt. Just pick up the quilt and blanket the world with realm of God, here on earth.

We are family.... whether we like it or not. Our quilt may be quite colorful with no particular pattern but when stitched together with the love of Christ Jesus within us, nothing can pull us a part.