

"The Church: Jesus' New Family"

Matthew 12:46-50

Rev. David K. Wood, Ph.D.

Deer Creek United Presbyterian Church/Pleasant Unity United Presbyterian Church

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A series of new but highly effective television commercials have been hitting the airwaves of late in an effort to boost falling recruitment numbers within our military. In the latest, a mother is upset with her son over his decision to join the army. It resembles a dream sequence where this mom dressed in a bathrobe finds herself outdoors in some misty swamp setting. She's calling out to her son, "Michael! Michael!" At once, Michael appears beside her covered in camouflage. She says to him, "Michael, you can do anything you want. Why THIS!" He explains how he doesn't want to be stuck somewhere behind a desk." Exasperated, she implores, "But out here on your own!" "I won't be on my own," he explains. "I'll be part of a team, making an impact." At that, ten or twelve of his comrades covered in the same camouflage gear rise from their crouching positions and begin yelling, "HOO HAH!" to show their solidarity with him. Then Michael says, "So what do you say, mom?" The words "Their success tomorrow begins with your support today" next appears on the screen. Finally, the dream sequence gives way to reality with Michael and his mother on the back deck of their home. She stands there staring proudly at him, having at last come to terms with his life-changing decision.

It seems these commercials have been generating a powerful response, ESPECIALLY among military families. I screened several on YouTube and one former soldier reacted by screaming at the top of his lungs that these may be the best military commercials ever made. He says he's had enough watching them trying to make guns and war appear glamorous in an effort to entice more young people to enlist, that there could not be anything more simple yet powerful than these ad pieces. Several respondents were mothers who admitted crying as they watched them because they were so real. One wrote that her son just started basic training and is now stationed at Fort Carson in Colorado. "I've supported him since the first time he mentioned it while others criticized him and called him crazy. On the inside, I feel like the parents in the videos. But I knew he needed someone to understand him and show him support and love. And that's exactly what I did." Another army mom responded that every time she brought her son to the army base after leave, she would hug him and then stand back, shake his hand and thank him for his service. Afterwards, she'd turn around, get in her car, and after making it around the curve where she couldn't be seen, pull over and cry her eyes out. On the one hand, she was so darn proud, but on the OTHER, so DARN SCARED for him!

I suspect the mother in our New Testament lesson might have had VERY SIMILAR emotions. No doubt she had OTHER designs for her son's future but Jesus surprised, perhaps even SHOCKED her, with plans of his OWN. As Mary's first-born, he occupied a special place in the family hierarchy. We can assume that Joseph has already died and therefore, as the eldest son, Jesus automatically assumes responsibility of now leading it. Of course, she still remembered the visions she had received at his birth and the prophecies regarding his future greatness. What has to be so shocking, however, is that instead of being there with his mom and

the rest of his siblings as he SHOULD, helping to support them and making important decisions on their behalf, they find him gallivanting around the countryside, associating with gentiles and the lowest of the low- prostitutes, lepers, and tax-collectors. Yes, he seems to have had some success with his preaching and teaching, earning a cadre of followers in the process. But the word on the street is that he is making some very dangerous enemies AS WELL- enemies that could eventually get him hurt, and EVEN POSSIBLY KILLED!

Like that commercial, I think Rose and I may have had SIMILAR emotions with regard to OUR son, ALSO named Michael, who for the past fourteen years has been in the service of the U.S. Navy. During the past four, he's been stationed in Japan, serving on aircraft carriers in what is now becoming one of the most dangerous areas in the world. In his last deployment which lasted six months on the U.S.S Ronald Reagan, they found themselves patrolling the straights of Korea and the South China Sea, constantly being surveilled and often threatened by Chinese aircraft carriers and North Korean warplanes. He was never allowed to tell us where exactly they were or what their mission was about but we knew that risk and danger were never far from him and the REST of his shipmates. One misstep by U.S. commanders could have grave consequences and possibly lead to WAR!

One thing we have learned is how the military in recruiting and transforming young men and women into well-disciplined fighting machines depends upon developing an "esprit de corps"- a feeling of pride, fellowship, and common loyalty shared by all the members of the group. Yes, they have to be thoroughly trained and equipped to protect our shores as well as U.S. interests around the world as they serve as the first line of defense in the event of an attack. But as every soldier knows, along with that training, there must be a common trust and dependence upon one another. An intimate bond of brotherhood and sisterhood must be fostered amongst themselves; they must all understand the meaning of *Semper Fi*, Latin for "Always faithful"- faithful to our COUNTRY but JUST as important, faithful to EACH OTHER. When you join the Army, Navy, or the Marines, you become part of a MUCH LARGER FAMILY which is why whenever one encounters a stranger who had at one time or another served in his or her particular branch of the service, an instinctive connection is often developed between them. They know they all had to go through the same rigorous program- one in which they found themselves transformed from naïve boys and girls into responsible and mature men and women who had to learn the meaning of teamwork and personal sacrifice along the way.

Well, the Church of Jesus Christ is NO DIFFERENT. There are few notions more radical than that as children of our Heavenly Father, as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, we have been united to one another into a "NEW family"- a universal brotherhood and sisterhood in which we find ourselves intimately related to each other "in and through him." It is a relationship which breaks down every racial and blood barrier, every age, sex, and class distinction. In fact, being "in Christ" creates a relation that is even closer than any BLOOD BOND, closer than any NATIONAL OR FAMILY TIE. That is because we are spiritually and supernaturally joined together in the communion of his body and blood, a relationship most perfectly signified in the sacrament of the Lord's Supper.

I know some of you must think I'm crazy when you hear me say that in the eyes of God, our relationship to not just one another here in this sanctuary this morning but our relationship to

EVERY OTHER child of God all over this world—whether past, present, and future--is a tie much closer and more intimate than the relationship we currently have with our parents and brothers and sisters, even our own children and grandchildren. After all, where a CULT might make such a demand from its followers, it's certainly not something WE would ever expect to hear, ESPECIALLY from the Church! Yet, Jesus said as much HIMSELF. When informed that his family was looking for him just outside the home he was teaching in, he responded by pointing to his friends and disciples and saying, "Behold my mother and my brethren. For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother." Above all, our absolute loyalty has to be to HIM FIRST or else he cannot use us!

And this wasn't the ONLY time he affirmed this. During his ministry, Christ spoke AGAIN AND AGAIN about the priority of God's claims on his disciples' lives, how they had to take precedence over the claims made on them by family. He once said, "He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me." When one follower requested that he be able to leave and bury his father, Jesus replied, "Let the dead bury the dead." To another who wanted to say goodbye to his parents, he said that any man who put his hands to the plow and looked back was not fit for the kingdom of God. He insisted that "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sister, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." He said this not to encourage persons to despise their families but in order to emphasize how just as money and property can come between us and the kingdom of God, so can our FAMILY ties. The interests of God's kingdom must be paramount in the lives of his followers and everything else must take second place to them, EVEN FAMILY.

Now Jesus was in no way disparaging his mother or brothers or sisters, or minimizing his relationship to them. Rather, he was stressing the importance of putting his Heavenly Father FIRST. He was placing his relationships in their proper place, that his CHURCH family--those who performed the will of his Heavenly Father--took priority while his NATURAL family had to come second. Jesus and the Apostles understood that our families and human relationships as we now know them would eventually pass away along with the rest of our present world while the Church as the family of God would remain LONG AFTER EVERYTHING ELSE was gone. Therefore, while there is some truth to the old adage "blood is thicker than water," still the solidarity and love created by the presence of Jesus Christ in one's life is THICKER YET.

However, it is not just ANY church that deserves this kind of total commitment- only the church that remains obedient to Christ's Father in heaven, and by extension, obedient to Christ himself. Only the church that is seriously and resolutely committed to his own love ethic, only the church that sees itself as a servant in the world and is willing to reach out to and embrace those who may be lost and lonely and poor and needy in its midst, only THESE are members of his REAL family- those who become his " brother and sister and mother." Anyone can call him or herself a Christian but the TRUE child of God is, as Jesus said, the one who follows him and fulfills the will of his Father in heaven.

Today, WE are members of that same family, a family that now stretches from sea to shining sea. When those early Christians gathered for their first Eucharistic supper together, it was but a simple meal in a small upper room in Jerusalem. Since then, it has been repeated

hundreds of thousands of times in churches both large and small throughout the past twenty centuries. But more important than the elements themselves, than the broken bread and the wine they partook of, was the NEW family unit that had been created through this act- they had become ONE, joined together as brothers and sisters- to each other and to Christ. As such, they were to love and care for one another as Jesus loved and cared for THEM.

One of my professors in seminary, Dr. Surgit Singh, was not born a Presbyterian- in fact, he wasn't even born a CHRISTIAN. He was born and raised in India in a devout Sikh home- Sikhism being an off-shoot of Hinduism and the fifth largest religion in the world. When he went off to college, he got involved with a group of Christians there and over time, developed more than just a passing interest in their religion- he, in fact, BECAME one. Getting involved in a Christian organization on campus, his faith deepened and eventually he knew at some point that he'd have to confront his family with the matter of his conversion. When he revealed to them what he had done, they threatened to disinherit him and throw him out of the family. However, when he refused, they THEN conspired to have him kidnapped and threatened with DEATH if he didn't renounce his new-found faith. Still maintaining his convictions, EVEN AT THE POINT OF DEATH, he continued to hold fast to it. Finally, they released him and his family responded by making it clear he would never again be welcomed under the same roof he'd grown up in; never again would he see his mother or father, his sisters and brothers, nor any OTHER member of his family- he had essentially become dead to them. In doing so, he had made a most radical commitment, an absolute sacrifice on behalf of Christ himself.

His decision to follow his Lord eventually led him to the States to attend graduate school here where he went on to earn a doctorate in Christian theology. subsequently becoming a full professor at one of our leading Presbyterian seminaries. You can see that following Jesus meant far more than just attending church on Sunday mornings- it was a matter of life and death for him. Church wasn't simply a group of Christians gathering for an hour to sing a few hymns, pray a few prayers, and listen to a sermon but foremost a family of faith, rooted in Christian love, and testifying of its truths to the REST of the world!

Every time we come together to unite over the Communion table, we are witnessing how we belong to a universal fellowship, one that transcends the centuries and knows no geographic barriers. That means there are no strangers, no visitors when the People of God gather. In fact, there are no Baptists or Methodists or Catholics or even Presbyterians, for as members of one and the same family, we are above such labels. There is no male or female, no black or white, no rich or poor, gay or straight, no pastor and lay persons, no Republican or Democrat for in Jesus Christ we have become one; all barriers and distinctions are erased. Each and every one of us is received by him on the same ETERNAL BASIS—the atoning work of Christ—and with the same EVERLASTING LOVE.

And if we ARE just such a family, then we need to CONDUCT ourselves as such and perfect ourselves in that same unity. We need to lay aside any distinctions that divide us, any feelings of superiority and pride we may hide- for we are a family. We need to lay aside any hard feelings we may have engendered, any deep hurts or petty resentments we have carried over the years for we are ONE, we are FAMILY- bound together, not by blood or race or even community, but by a COMMON calling, a COMMON faith, a COMMON Spirit, a COMMON

love, sharing a COMMON purpose and eternal destiny.

Thus, to be a part of Christ's church is so much more than just being part of an historic denomination. It is more than some handsome brick building for people to worship in week after week or soft comfortable pews in which to hear the preacher deliver his or her slickly-honed and carefully-practiced sermons. The church was never meant to be just one more fellowship or civic association among so many others, like the Rotary Club with a little organ music thrown in as one of my professors liked to say. Rather, the church is foremost a FAMILY, a basic social unit established upon essential spiritual principles.

However, it is often thought that the church is meant to represent on the spiritual plane what the human family is on the natural and biological, that the church is merely a spiritual extension of civilization's most basic social unit. But that's a great misconception for the answer is just the OPPOSITE- the human family is intended to model itself after the spiritual pattern laid down by Christ and his church; the church takes precedence over and becomes the pattern for the human family to follow and not the other way around. Thus the life lived by the saints of God in their regular assemblies and the quality of love manifested in and through them is not merely a reflection of the love that already exists between husbands and their wives, parents and their children. Rather, the church is a mirror of CHRIST'S life and HIS love which, in turn, is embodied by and exhibited in our own familial life. When we love even as WE are loved by our Lord Jesus himself, only then do we show ourselves to be members of Christ's OWN family; only THEN do we join with others in becoming the most LASTING, most INCLUSIVE, and most UNIFIED fellowship the world has ever seen. Let us pray...

*Lord Jesus, by your grace, bring us into your big family. Help us to feel part of the family. Help us to see people as brothers and sisters in your family. In the name of the one who was crucified for hanging out with people like us, we pray. Amen.*