

Welcome Home

Psalm 133, Mark 3:31-35, Galatians 6:10

August 6, 2006

Jan Shea

I grew up in a typical early 60's tract home. I suppose that it was small by today's standards, but it seemed to be a perfect fit then. There were 3 bedrooms, 2 baths for the 4 of us - Mom, Dad, my younger brother and I - so there was enough privacy. But the rest of the house was compact enough that when we were together- we were really TOGETHER. That always felt really good to me. There was a living room, a small kitchen and another room. I remember that a lot of my friends called this the "tv room" in their homes. But, that would never fly with my parents. They had a lot of rules about the television. One of our least favorite was the prohibition on any shows which depicted the father as an "incompetent idiot". As far as my brother and I were concerned, this rule pretty much eliminated all of the good shows.

But I digress. The room was one of those combo living/eating/high traffic/everybody comes through it on the way to the backyard areas. It was not large. There was room for a small couch and a chair in one corner, and our dining room table was in there but it had to be pushed all the way against the opposite wall. My little brother was 6 when we moved to that house, and I think the multiple functions of this room must have really impressed him because he began to call it the "everything room". I was 9 and thought that sounded pretty dorky and so I put a quick stop to that by calling it the family room. But I think he may have had the right idea. It really was our everything room.

We weren't the kind of family that kept the living room for "show". We used that room, too. Of course, the living room was the place we sat with company. My parents would listen to music in the evening. We were avid readers and there was one whole wall filled with my parents' books. And, the furniture looked a lot better in there.

But the family room was where we spent most of our time. Not only did we eat and watch (limited) television, we also did our homework and art projects in there. My father could usually be found reading a book on the couch. We played board games and put together puzzles after dinner. We had family meetings where we planned vacations, and negotiated larger allowances and later curfews. This is where I learned to sew, type, and balance a checkbook. It's where Terry and I told my family we were engaged, and years later where we told them I was pregnant.

I tell you about this, because recently I was trying to describe how I feel about church. Specifically, this church. I finally settled on saying that it feels like coming home. It feels like my childhood family room. The same feelings of comfort, protection, safety, happiness, learning, challenge, and love which I associate with that room – I also associate with this place.

It's clear from this morning's Scripture that Christ wanted us to think of ourselves as family. And with good reason! The word family paints a mental picture worth more than a thousand words. When we begin to associate the concept of Church Family with the concept of family we are born into, the connections start forming immediately! And as we dig into them, more and more layers of meaning are revealed. So this morning I want to talk about how some of the most basic concepts of family apply to the faith family.

Concept #1: **Human beings are meant to grow up in a family.** Do you know people who insist that they don't "need" to go to church to be a Christian. That they can worship God on their own and it is just as meaningful? (Right...) I know I believed that for a long time, too. But I never seemed to grow in my faith. Babies and children (and teenagers too!) need the structure and the socialization and the protection and the instruction and the love that family provides. And of course Christians need all of that too!

When an infant or young child does not grow normally due to some organic cause, or because they don't receive the proper nutrition, or care, they may be diagnosed with "failure to thrive". Consider any aspect of Christian Life – study, worship, prayer, and we are more likely to thrive in the context of a strong and loving faith family.

Can you imagine reading the Bible, front to back, with absolutely no frame of reference, no framework from which to start from, nowhere to ask questions. It would be hard to keep the Bible from becoming simply a book. When we are part of a community of Christians, we begin to grasp the themes at work. Our personal study becomes a series of ah-ha moments. And when we study together, we listen to other's viewpoints, we struggle to frame our own theology, we express our doubts and our frustrations, we struggle some more. Little by little, the spiritual fog begins to lift. We come to some level of clarity – and then move on to wrestle with the next issue. We grow.

Even prayer, perhaps the most solitary aspects of the Christian life, still benefits when we are in community. When we receive guidance through prayer, we still need to check in with another human being from time to time- "Am I hearing it right?" "What does this mean?" "Will you pray about this also?"

Concept #2: A family cares for one another. Family offers us our first look at love, nurture and protection. Things happen in life, and when they do, family bands together to take care of their own. I have watched this faith family rally around those in the midst of the best of life as well as the tough times. Visiting, providing meals and rides, caring for children, prayer support – taking the burden. Even in non crisis situations, family takes care of one another. I know what it feels like to realize that a single phone call is all it takes to find someone to watch your kids, to borrow a car, to help you pull together a costume for the school play, or to teach you how to make the perfect cake for your mother-in-law’s birthday. I know what it feels like, and it feels wonderful!

Sometimes I forget that the whole world doesn’t operate like this. Sometimes I forget that in some areas of my life, my only value is what I produce, or how much money I can pay, or whether or not I am “fun” to be with. It’s all about what I can bring to the table. So what happens when I have nothing to bring.

Sometimes I forget that the whole world isn’t ready to catch me if I fall... doesn’t cheer my successes or encourage me in my failures... won’t help me through my darkest moments... won’t nudge me back where I belong...doesn’t want to see the real me. But I get all of that here.

Each Sunday we recall together that “As part of our discipleship, we also work to increase our love for one another.” I hope you don’t skip through that one too quickly without really considering what that means. “Increase our love for one another.” This is really a lot harder than it may seem at first glance. Loving one another doesn’t mean we love everything about her, or even like everything he does. And it certainly doesn’t mean to love only the lovable. It means loving them as they come. Imperfect and struggling and learning and growing – just as we are. We love them for possibility and promise and the fact that God loves them more than we can possibly know. We love them because they are our family.

Concept #3: We each have a role in the family. Perhaps we don’t have much control over the dynamics in the family we are born into. Sometimes we assume a role based on circumstances or of someone else’s choosing. Baby, First Born, Smart One, Troublemaker, Funny One, Talented One. I know adults who have struggled for years to get out of one of those roles. But they feel locked in. Christ’s family is one where we have choice. Of course, there is the destined role that God has selected for us: to be a growing, unique spiritual being with genuine talent and purpose in life. But we still have the choice to reject it and become the rebellious child, or to refuse to grow into it

and stay the helpless baby. Or to accept it and do our best to live it and become a full fledged member of the family..

We want to do things for a little baby, don't we? To provide for his total comfort. Babies are sweet and cuddly and our hearts break when they are unhappy. But a 7 year old who refuses to do anything for himself, let alone for the rest of the family. Who demands that all his needs are met. That is not cute. That's pathetic. There is a point in our spiritual growth when we may need to take it all in. But, it is certainly not God's will that we stay "the baby" forever

Growing up, we had a chore chart. Countless family meetings were spent assigning the jobs. Stars went on the chart when the chore was complete. My parents helped us to see that we were important to the operation of the family. As we grew older, the jobs became more complex. Feeding the dog turned into bathing the dog. Setting the table and doing the dishes progressed to preparing a meal for the whole family. By the time we left home, both my brother and I were prepared. We knew the basic skills of living. And we were useful to the family, freeing Mom and Dad to concentrate on higher level tasks.

Our recall reminds us of what we need to do to keep our own spiritual self and in turn our family strong...pray and study scripture every day, seek God's will for our lives, work to increase our love for one another, contribute financially and in service, and in conversation and help our family grow.

I'd like to interrupt with a brief commercial message here. Did you know that you have exactly 98 praying days left before Covenant Sunday? That's exactly 98 days to consider your role in this family during the coming year. Of course we all need to continue praying beyond that because the roles and jobs and assignments are continually handed out, or come through with greater clarity. But Covenant Sunday is sure a good day to shoot for, because it gives you a chance to declare the role you are ready to take, and lets the church know in a timely way what your intentions are with us.

What are you doing to grow yourself, your brothers and sisters in Christ, your church. Have you made the decision to wean yourself, to get walking, to take on a few jobs, to take on more complex jobs? Not sure where to start? You can start with the recall. Are you really praying and studying and loving the way you need to? Are you earnestly moving toward tithing? Are you tithing your time and your conversation?

Back to the sermon. Each family chooses its identity too. To be functional or dysfunctional, open or closed, happy or grim. Not only do we choose to accept our role as individuals. We choose a role as a family. I think we do a pretty good job with this.

We are not perfect. But then, I suppose that's one of the things that attracted us to one another in the first place. Our family role is always something we need to keep checking ourselves on. Are our faith and love and discipline increasing "until they flow beyond our fellowship and become a blessing to others"?

One last thought. I realize and am always grateful that I grew up in a house with two wonderful and wise parents. I always knew that I was loved. I always knew that they wanted the best for me. Just as important, I knew they loved each other. There was an openness in our family...mutual respect...real affection. There still is.

But, I know that not everyone has that experience when they grow up. I know many adults who still bear the scars of families which were lacking. But one thing I've learned from this church, is that no matter what sort of family we may have been born into...We have a chance to recreate a family here.

A few years ago, I received a birthday card from someone here. She wrote a sweet note and closed it with the words "Your sister" and then her name. And it hit me like a lightning bolt. I who only had one brother had countless brothers and sisters who cared deeply for me. That when I had been reborn in Christ, I was born into a whole new family of brothers and sisters. Although not born of the same body or even with the same blood, we are forever bound by the body and blood of Christ. This is our gift. Welcome home!