

Date: August 29, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 22

**SERMON: Family Values and Table Manners**

Text(s): Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16; Luke 14:7-14

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Well, it's back-to-school time again, and depending on whether you're a parent or a student, it may be either the best of times or the worst of times. One of my favorite issues of the comic strip "Cathy," is where Cathy is asking a colleague at her office how her summer vacation was. The colleague begins singing "The children are going back to school, the children are going back to school. God bless America, the children are going back to school." In the face of this outburst, Cathy remarks, "Nothing rekindles true family values like two weeks in a camper."

Family values, or the lack of them, are a major topic of public discourse these days. It's no secret that Western culture is experiencing a crisis of family values, and not just because the family has spent two weeks of vacation in a camper. Sociologists and politicians on both the left and the right agree that the bonds which once existed within both nuclear and extended families, have broken down, or at least, are undergoing dramatic, and not necessarily positive changes. Those of us in mid-life or older can remember a time when family ties seemed stronger than they are now. While many people still live within fifty miles of their birthplace, many others do not. Most of us in this congregation who are "from away" live widely separated from our families. My own two brothers live in Michigan, my parents in western Pennsylvania, my cousins in Indiana, Georgia, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Mississippi, and that's probably typical of many of us here. Issues such as how to care for aging parents take on an entirely different cast now when children are scattered around the country or even around the world, than they did in an earlier generation, when more people remained close to where they were born.

Nor is the situation any better even within

our immediate nuclear families. In the first place, about half of us don't even have a "nuclear" family—with two parents and children living in the same house. The whole issue of what constitutes a nuclear family is undergoing rapid, and to some people, scary, redefinition. You may have seen the article in the latest issue of *Time* a few days ago about the problems faced by divorced parents who have joint custody of children, and how those children often have to adapt to two different sets of behavioral rules and expectations. And of course, the whole issue of whether gay couples can be married is an issue that twenty years ago could hardly have been conceived much less discussed on a national forum.

Even where traditional nuclear families still exist, there are all sorts of pressures that prevent much interaction from taking place. New fashions in house design give every family member large private living spaces, so that even when everyone is at home, siblings and parents can often live totally separate lives. And we keep such crazy schedules and live at such a hectic pace that we rarely sit down to eat a meal together, one of life's most fundamental and sacramental experiences of community.

The loss of what we term "family values", is a loss of shared commitments, shared goals, and shared identity. When there is no experience of genuine community in which the individual members recognize their mutual obligations and mutual responsibilities for one another, then narrow, and usually competing, self-interest governs behavior. If I don't recognize you as someone to whom I am bound in relationships of mutuality, or to put it another way, if I don't regard you as "family" in some way, then my values will not take your needs into account. My own needs and interests will always tend to take precedence over yours. Or to put it in the terms that Jesus does in our gospel lesson, we will always tend to choose the best seats at the table for ourselves rather than having the good manners to allow others to precede us. And it is precisely that priority of self-interest that

undermines genuine community to the point where we lose sight of the common good.

Our epistle lesson this morning suggests that it is the mission of the church to model genuine community in the midst of diversity and to live out the family values of that community. In fact, many historians of early Christianity agree that a major reason that the early Christian church, succeeded against all odds and in the teeth of adversity, in becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire within three hundred years of its founding, was that it offered people who were alienated and isolated and diverse, a place where they were welcomed and accepted as members of the family. In the first century under the rule of imperial Rome, rapid urbanization, uprooting from traditional village culture and breakup of the extended family relationships, and cosmopolitan mixing of different ethnic and religious groups was causing a breakdown of community and family values just as it is now. Alienated from their shared value systems, they were searching for community, for family, just as people in our society are searching.

Imagine, then, the drawing power of a movement where Jews, Gentile pagans, big city merchants, poor country farmers, women and men from different cultures and languages met together to worship, to share meals together, to care for one another, to share even their material goods with those who lacked the necessities of life, and where the welcome mat was always out for new people to come in and be accepted as part of the family! The early church grew, because they knew what community was and they lived by the values of that community in the midst of, and in some cases, in spite of, their diversity.

How did they manage to recognize one another as “family” despite their diverse makeup and background? Well, it must be admitted that they didn’t always. They could be as blind, as parochial, as prejudiced as any of us can. But in many instances, certainly enough to provoke a

powerful attraction to thousands of people as well as a powerful reaction from the powers that be, they recognized that their common identity lay not in ethnic origin or language or economic class or social status. Rather, they recognized that they were all adopted children in the family of God. They believed that what God had done in and through Jesus Christ had broken down the walls of separation of tribe, gender, social class, economic status and custom, to reach out to them in their alienation and isolation and welcome them in and sit them down at the family table. Their adoption into God’s family was the basis of their common life. It was God’s action, not theirs, that created community. Recognizing that fact, they could then discover together the family values that enabled them to reach out to others who were lonely and alienated and hurting and draw them into their fellowship. This very practice was the basis of one of the consistent criticisms leveled at the early Christians by their pagan critics, such as the second-century intellectual named Celsus. How could a movement be good when it insisted on overturning the long-established systems of distinction and discrimination based on social status, education, and family lineage?

I gained deeper insight into this mystery of community whereby God adopts all of us into his family and binds us together when we got a new niece and nephew some years ago. My youngest brother and his wife, tried for nearly ten years to have children; they went through all the routines that a couple who is unable to conceive usually go through—consultations with fertility specialists, medical tests—all of that. Finally, they decided to adopt. At the time, one of the easiest ways to adopt a child was to work through Christian agencies in Korea. I can remember the feelings of ambivalence in my parents as they tried to imagine what it would be like to have grandchildren, first of all, who were not the natural children of their son and his wife, and secondly, to have grandchildren who were of

another race. But from the moment that tiny baby who is our 15 year-old niece Kaylee was carried off the plane, all those feelings of ambivalence instantly disappeared. A new member of the family joined us at the family table from that moment on. And a couple of years later, a Korean baby boy named Benjamin came to join the family too, and another chair had to be pulled up to the table. Our definition of family had to expand to include them, but we have been immeasurably enriched by what they have brought, and will bring in the future, to our family. So whatever family values govern our life together, those values must take into account the unique needs and the unique gifts that Kaylee and Ben have brought to us. The values grow out of the experience of being a family, of being a community.

It works the same way in the family of God. The values that govern our life and our behavior emerge out of our experience of having been adopted and given a place at the family table. Those values, and the basis for them are in view in this conclusion from the Epistle to the Hebrews today. They show us how to live so that we can be the model for the rest of the world.

They are more or less self-explanatory and need no lengthy discussion. The first family value listed here is *“Let mutual love continue.”* The word translated here as “mutual love,” is a word that means the commitment to one another that comrades in a joint enterprise have. “Team spirit,” might be a more contemporary way of translating this word for love. Anybody who's been watching the Olympics or ever played a team sport knows that regardless of how great or how modest the individual talents are, unless there is a commitment to work for the greater good of the team, to pull together, to commit to one another, victory will remain only a dream. When our two-person women's beach volleyball team won the gold in Athens last week, I thought it was great that the first thing both of them said when interviewed was to express gratitude for

being able to be the partner of the other.

*“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing so, some have entertained angels without knowing it,”* is the second exhortation. Hospitality is more than just shaking hands with visitors to our church on Sunday and telling them we're glad they came to our church. Hospitality means taking the risk of admitting those whom we regard as outsiders to the family table and treating them as family, just as God has done with us. The strangers may turn out to be angels bearing gifts, as Abraham and Sarah discovered, for that's the story to which the writer alludes. Hospitality reveals those gifts and permits them to be offered and received.

On the list goes: *“Let marriage be held in honor and the marital bed undefiled.”* In a world where marriages disintegrate at an alarming rate and sexuality is no more than an itch to be scratched, where will people be able to look to discover covenant faithfulness and integrity in sexual relationships if not to the family of God?

*“Keep yourselves free from the love of money. . . for God has said, ‘I will never leave you nor forsake you.’ ”* Where can our “shop-till-you-drop” culture find freedom from its obsession with things and its compulsive greed unless it sees a model of just economic relationships and true stewardship of the earth's resources lived out by a community of people who gladly confess their utter dependence upon God?

We can only practice all of these family values if we first recognize the one bedrock on which all of them are based, and on which our very identity as the family of God is based. Right in the middle of this whole shopping list of ethical and moral instructions to the Christian community, a rather startling statement appears from seemingly out of nowhere. *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.”* As we look more closely, it becomes clear that that

single statement, “Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever,” is the foundation under all the family values and the genuine community out of which they emerge. Community is a gift, given to us by a God whose unchanging will to save, whose will to bring together all things in heaven and earth into one harmonious whole, has been revealed in Jesus Christ. If, as our writer tells us, “*we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken,*” it is because the one who has revealed that kingdom and brought it among us is an unchanging person. Because the God whose saving, redemptive purpose is revealed in Jesus Christ does not change, we already have been, in fact, bound together in one new humanity through the resurrection of Christ. That is the basis upon which we begin to recover and practice the family values necessary, not to create community, but to realize the community which we have already been given.

Because we are imperfect and changeable, we will not always realize those new family values perfectly. We will fail, we will make mistakes, we will sin against one another from time to time. But if we will commit ourselves to practicing these family values to the best of our ability and in true humility, always ready to seek forgiveness from one another when we fail, then we will begin to embody that new humanity. And those outside— the poor, the wounded, the strangers, the excluded— will come to know that they too have a place at the family table. And then, at last, the world will experience the true community of love and justice that is the Kingdom of God.