

Family Portrait

a sermon

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1 John 5:1-6

It's often said that the church is a family.

A good number of you have said this about our church.

That's really nice. And it's a good thing. It's a good thing when people think of their church as a family.

Usually.

It's good that people experience their church as a family, provided that the family they experience there is happy and healthy, nurturing and affirming, a place of safety and comfort and growth and depth.

But some families are not. Instead, some families are unhealthy and abusive. Some families are neurotic and controlling. As families go, they might be more like the Bunker family, or the Adams family, or the Soprano family, or the Manson family.

A church family might be like that.

Some families are strong on being "family" to each other. But they are very closed to those who are not part of the family. They show their care and concern only to members of the family. Others are regarded with suspicion; they are ignored, mistreated. The family might tell slanderous gossip about people outside of the family. The parents might teach the children prejudice and bias against "those people."

A church family might be like that.

There are families

in which love is conditional,
affection is earned,
nurture is grudgingly bestowed,

where parents play favorites among the children, and the children compete against each other for the parents' attention.

A church family might be like that.

We know of families that are prisons of co-dependency, where secrets are kept and lies are told, to keep the peace, to protect the monster.

A church family might be like that.

Just because a church claims it's a family doesn't mean that you want to be part of that family. Or that'd you be welcome in that family.

What is the picture of family that people look for in a church?

What is the picture of family people see in *our* church?

What is our family portrait?



There's a bit of family language in the Bible passage I read. This passage from First John describes believers in Jesus as having been born of God. It talks about us as children and God as our parent. It describes that relationship between us and God, between those who have been born and the one from whom they are born, as a relationship of love.

It's not the only time family language is used in this letter. Again and again, the people of Jesus are called "children" and "little children." They — we! — are called "beloved" and described as brothers and sisters of each other.

Here, in these verses, there's a whole bunch going on, and a fair amount of it may be a bit hidden to us.

One of my favorite professors, Paul Achtemeier, liked to say that reading one of the letters in the New Testament was like listening in to one side of a phone call. You're in the same room as your friend, who is on the phone with someone else. You can hear everything *she* is saying to the person on the other end. But you're not hearing *that* person; you're hearing only your *friend's* statements and questions and responses. From that you try to piece together what the other person is saying, in order to understand the whole conversation.

Understanding scripture can be like that. We have to figure out the other side of the conversation, what we *can't* hear from what we *can* hear, in order to get a more complete picture of what was really being discussed.

With First John and the passage before us, what was that "other side"?

I can't say for sure about *all* that went into the conversation. But I'm pretty confident that part of it was an argument about what it meant for the church to be a family. I believe that this letter is painting one family portrait, and rejecting another portrait, judging the other one to be not just bad art but also bad theology, a denial of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

What was that other family portrait? What was that other understanding of the church as a family?

Well, it was a very closed group, that family. It was a family that *had* favorites and *played* favorites.

Those painting this family portrait, the one rejected in First John, understood faith as having special knowledge that would free those who gained it from all the ugliness of physical reality. It was a strange family portrait they would then paint: one that didn't show physical bodies, because those were icky and gross and unholy. Their understanding of "spirituality" was as something opposed to all physical reality. The goal, for them, was to be released from the physical.

All of this even applied to Jesus. These alternative-portrait-painters did not believe that Jesus was truly human. They did not believe that he had a body:

one that grew,
one that got hungry,
one that got thirsty,
one that suffered
one that died.

They simply did not, could not, believe that.

For them, Jesus was a pure spiritual being. His divine nature did not allow itself to be sullied by the filth of a physical body.

That's the understanding of Jesus they had. That's the portrait of Jesus they painted.

Included in their strange family portrait would be only those who had the special knowledge and who were on their way to transcending the bonds of mere bodily existence. Which means that only a very few could be in their family portrait. And the way those in the portrait were painted alongside each other — I'm not sure that I'd call it "love." The kind of family connections between the people in that group were entirely "spiritual" in their very narrow and very odd understanding of "spiritual."

Practically speaking, here's what it meant:

They saw no need for caring for each other in physical ways.

They saw no need to tend to each other's bodily and material needs.

After all, what good was the body? Truly spiritual people don't have such worldly concerns. And if they aren't truly spiritual, then they aren't my problem. They don't deserve my love.



John paints a very different portrait.

It's a portrait of love.

It's a portrait of embodied spirituality.

It's a portrait of care for each other's physical needs.

Inclusion in this portrait is not for the elite alone, the accomplished, the special, the self-actualized. We who believe in Jesus and confess that he is the Christ have *God* to thank for this. We are in the portrait, we are part of the family, not as an achievement on our part, not as a gold star for a job well done, but simply as children born into the family.

There's activity in this family portrait John paints; there's movement; it's a moving picture; there's response and responsibility. Having been made a part of the family, we show that we *are* part of the family by loving God.

That's what God wants of us: to love God, and to obey what God commands us to do.

Don't worry! It's not as hard as it sounds, John tells us. God's commandments are not a burden. They are not the high bar set by the weirdly spiritual portrait painters with their disembodied and exclusive portrait of an exclusive set of disembodied spiritual entities liberated by a Jesus who never had a body.

We can do this! We are born of God! And because we are born of God, we can love God and we can obey God's commands!

That's what it means to be part of the family, and it is seen in this family portrait.

Yet what are God's commands?

We must not ignore all that happens in this letter, things that, if you've been here the last couple of weeks, you have already read. It's quite clear that the center of God's commands in First John is to love one another. And this love is attentive to the bodily needs and physical struggles of our brothers and sisters.

This love is about feeding and healing.

This love concerns food and clothing and shelter.

This love

binds up wounds
and fills bellies
and gives warmth when the temperatures drop.

This love

makes meals,
makes clothing,
makes phone calls.

This love

listens,
and speaks,
and breathes,
and laughs,
and cries,
and sings,
and walks,
and runs.

This love, this Christian love, is physical because Christ was physical. It is bodily because Christ had a body. This love is the enactment of the good news of Jesus, “who came by water and blood, ...not with water *only* but with the water *and* the blood,” a blood that bled when he willingly spilled it for our redemption.

This is the family portrait painted by John.



And I am convinced that it is the portrait that must be ours. We must love this portrait. We must view this portrait as showing the ideal toward which we must strive. We must let this portrait guide how we treat one another.

Many of you think of us as a family. Let's show how truly we are family to each other:

with obedient love for God,
with practical love for each other,
in our attentiveness to the physical needs of those around us.

Let's live out the family portrait into which we have already been painted, as we show we are family with all the creative and embodied love of those born of God.