

## Formed for God's Family

I Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13 Ephesians 2:19-22, 4:1-3

Coming to the end of one's pastoral ministry journey after 40 years causes you do some reflecting. Not that we have had a lot of time for thinking about the past, with all the preparations, house hunting and paper processing, and all of the other transition issues...but still there are those moments when you think back. And for me part of that reflection goes back beyond my call to ministry, thinking about my childhood, and especially the role the church has had on my personal life and those things that were most important to me. I'm grateful for parents who felt it was important to be involved in the life of the church. And on this confirmation weekend, I can't emphasize enough the privilege and the responsibility of parents and family to continue to lead their children in their spiritual walk and their connection to the church of Jesus Christ.

In Rick Warren's 40 Days of Purpose he makes this statement about our relationship with the Lord. "You were formed for God's family." That the very nature of God is relational and that God has created us to be in relationship with Him and with one another. It is our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ that allows us to discover we are part of the family of God. And so we use the terms like...we are a baptized community, we are a household of faith, we are the family of God. There is an old Gaither song that says it well: "I'm so glad I'm a part of the family of God, I've been washed in the fountain, cleansed by his blood. Joint heirs with Jesus as we travel this sod, for I'm part of the family, the family of God."

The apostle Paul describes it like this: We are the body of Christ, we are the temple, God's building, God's household. And as he writes he knows that the very nature of the church consists of many different people, with different backgrounds, different histories, personal stories, and he describes it as many members, but one body. That's who we are here as the FUMC family...many members, many different personal stories of life and of faith, but one body in Jesus Christ.

I suppose most of us cherish the relationships we share in our personal families. We have our differences. Just get together for a family dinner and those differences can surface. Different political views, various opinions on a number of topics, and sometimes there can be a healthy discussion and maybe even some less than friendly quarreling over different issues as we share our viewpoints. But in the end we are still family and we cherish that special connection. Well, there is also a

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very powerful connection that we share as the family of God. It is what binds us together now and for eternity. It is who we are as the body of Christ, formed for God's family.

This special family...it is so vital for our spiritual well-being. God has designed us in such a way that we need each other in this community of faith. You were not made to live your life in isolation. You are not expected to develop and nurture your spiritual life on your own. We need each other to grow spiritually and when we become careless about our fellowship, our spiritual life is placed in danger of just withering away.

So here we are to support each other, to challenge each other, and to be the family of God together. Did you know that the phrase "one another" or "each other" is found over 50 times in the New Testament. We are commanded to love each other, pray for each other, encourage one another, admonish one another, serve each other, teach each other, honor one another, forgive each other, be devoted to each other...I think we get the point – to be in relationship with God is to be in a relationship with God's family. We need each other. For those who are being confirmed this weekend, they come forward to commit themselves to Christ and his church with sacred vows. One of those vows says they will support the church with their presence. In other words, they recognize the importance of being together to worship, to learn and to grow together in their faith. And so we celebrate their taking this step of commitment to be part of our fellowship.

Briefly I want to highlight three important characteristics of this fellowship that God has given us. Three things that should describe us as the family of God.

The first one has to do with the way we carry ourselves within this family. If we are truly the church of Jesus Christ, if we claim his name, then others around us should see how we love each other. We call it "agape" love, a devoted covenant love is the essential and most powerful ingredient that we can stir into the mix of our fellowship. Without it, we can do all the church activities we want, come up with a million ideas for programs, talk about the Lord, the Bible, our doctrines, and beliefs, but if we do not demonstrate that we really, and genuinely care about each other, then our plans and programs will have little impact. Because love is one of those eternal qualities...You remember how the apostle Paul talks about loves...we can speak with the tongues of angels, have

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prophetic powers, have faith to move mountains, give away all my possessions...we can do all these things and they would be for nought, they would mean nothing, if we not have the spirit of love. Faith, hope and love, these three abide, he says, but the greatest of these is love. This Jesus, says, is how others will know that we are his disciples, if you have love for one another.

The second characteristic of this family of God has to do with the spirit in which we do our ministry. That we would really get a hold of how special and how important it is that we are part of this spiritual family. It should cause to get excited, and live with a passion for the Lord...yes, even more excited than an Eagles Super Bowl win, or a Phillie Phanatic World Series championship. When we consider what Christ has done for us, when we grasp the significance of the life we have in Christ it should stir our hearts.

It is said that it occurred right after Ben Franklin's kite flying days that some Frenchmen were also experimenting with electricity. The Abbot of a large monastery volunteered his monks for an experiment. Well, of course these monks had taken a vow of obedience so they had no choice. So they lined up a thousand of these monks, each holding the hands of those next to them. Then an electric current was applied to the first man in line, and according to an account of the experiment, every one of those thousand monks jumped up in the air at precisely the same moment. That must have been quite a sight! One writer drew three conclusions from this story: First, electricity moves with astonishing speed, second, abbots in French monasteries in the 18<sup>th</sup> century had tremendous authority over their monks. And third, wouldn't it be wonderful if a thousand people in church today could get excited enough to jump into the air at the same time.

Hey, there should be an enthusiasm about us. Actually the word "enthusiasm" has its root in meaning inspired or in God. So it is the Spirit of God in us that creates an enthusiasm in us. The kids proclaimed it so wonderfully last weekend in their musical, Soul on Fire. "God, I'm running for Your heart, I'm running for Your heart, Till I am a soul on fire Lord, I'm longing for Your ways, I'm waiting for the day when I am a soul on fire." They were fire station 12-11 because the Scripture they proclaimed was from Romans 12:11: "Never let the fire in your heart go out. Keep it alive. Serve the Lord."

And one more key characteristic that should be evident in this community of faith. Being part of the family of God means learning to

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live in unity. Because it is the work of the Holy Spirit to unite us. It is the work of the enemy of God to divide us. That we would work for unity in the family of God. Listen again to the Paul's word to the Ephesian church. "Bear with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit." We know as the family of God we have differences, and some of those differences are significant, and they have the potential to pull us apart and put us into different camps. And we may not be happy with something in the church, or some person in the church...but we have to remember there is no perfect church...and we hold on to our viewpoints based on how we understand our faith, and how we seek to live out our faith, but the important thing is to work together to build our relationships, to better understand each other, as we are all grappling with how do we live out our faith and how do we work to building up the body of Christ.

I am reminded of the story of the little boy who had wandered off into one of those large wheat fields of his Kansas home. After seeking him for some time, his parents called all of their neighbors to form a massive search party. All through the night they searched as the temperature dropped to 18 degrees. The next day they continued to look with no success. Finally someone came up with the idea of joining hands, a group of about 50 people and start walking across the field. Soon the little boy was found, but it was too late. He had died of exposure. The father bringing the little boy back to the house in his arms cried out: "If we had only joined hands sooner." It is who we are as the family of God, joining hands to carry out Christ's mission. To seek those who are lost, to heal the wounds of the broken. And we must remember that this is the mission of all of us together. (These who being confirmed need to know our prayers, our support, and our love. For they too have much to offer as part of this household of faith, to help us carry out Christ's mission)

For in the end, that's how our fellowship in Christ becomes so much richer. When we see who we are called to be as Christ's disciples...to encourage our brothers and sisters in their faith. When we can expend our energy in strengthening our church family. A loving fellowship, passionate about our faith and living out our calling together. We are formed for God's family. We celebrate our faith in Jesus Christ and we know that it is a special blessing to be part of the family of God.