

"The Church in the Age of Pandemic?"

Matthew 12:46-50

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In this week's sermon, I'm about to declare something which upon hearing, your initial response will undoubtedly be to take offense to, to cross your arms in a defensive posture and then mutter to yourself, "Dave, that's the STUPIDEST thing I have ever heard!" Please, bear with me. As we are coming up to Pentecost in a few weeks time, the "birth of the Church," I want to remind everyone—myself included—WHAT THE BODY OF JESUS CHRIST IS AND IS NOT, and the answer just might SURPRISE you. 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 him." It is a relationship which breaks down every racial and blood barrier, every age, sex, and class barrier. 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 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 one another here, our relationship to all the other churches in and around the Pittsburgh area, our relationship to the churches throughout Pennsylvania and the rest of the U.S., in fact our relationship to persons of faith THROUGHOUT THE WORLD since the Church's inception over two thousand years ago is a tie closer and more intimate than the relationship we presently enjoy 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."

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.

William Willimon, the former Methodist bishop from Alabama who for years served as chaplain to Duke University, told a story some years ago that powerfully sums up for me this notion of the Church as one great big family. He said it took place in a former congregation of his during their Sunday morning worship service. Everything was humming along smoothly. The music was sung with gusto, the prayers prayed with great solemnity, and the sermon hit all the right notes. Following his sermon, he segued into joys and concerns and asked if any members had something to share. Someone stood up to say that a parent had just gotten home from the hospital and was expected to make a full recovery and this was followed by a young girl who wanted to share how she and her high school band had gone on to win an important music competition the day before. And there were also the usual requests FOR prayer- a member was going in for a biopsy that week while another asked for the church to keep him in prayer as he went for a job interview. Willimon said as the service wound down, he was already congratulating himself for getting through another successful Sunday church service.

Before launching into the pastoral prayer, he figured he'd make one last request to see if

there was anything else someone might have to share. At that, one of the members of the church, a woman of around thirty, hesitantly rose from among the pews and with stammering lips said, "Yes, I do. My husband left me this week and I don't know how I'm going to pay the bills or get my children to and from school." Tears welled up in her eyes and the desperation was evident to everyone. Willimon said in that moment, it was the LAST thing in the world he wanted to hear and he couldn't help thinking to himself, "How dare you spoil a perfectly good church service with something like that." But more than the inconvenience that such a problem created for him, he found himself becoming increasingly paralyzed by the thought that he didn't really know what to say or do about the matter. Should he stop everything to pray for her right then and there? Should he tell her that he'd speak to her after the service? What could he realistically do for her? He wasn't quite sure.

But then something happened to once again affirm that you can never underestimate the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the life of the church. Almost immediately, one of the members stood to her feet and said, "Janey, you tell me how much you need and I'll make sure there'll be enough money to help you through this. Don't you worry about finances." Another member stood up and said, "I'll come by the house tomorrow morning and take the kids to school when I take my own. I'll also bring them home when school's over for you. They're going to be OK." Another person stood up and said, "Jane, if you need any babysitting, you let me know and I'll be right over. Your time is my time." Still another rose to invite her and the children over for dinner after church and then she would take her grocery shopping afterwards."

Willimon said he stood there with his mouth open- just incredulous at the loving response made for this woman by her church family in a moment of real crisis. He felt inner shame for those selfish thoughts that had momentarily passed through his mind but the guilt was soon dispelled by what was taking place before him- the amazing realization that he had just witnessed the church actually BE the church before his eyes. 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. NO, it was a family of faith rooted in Christian love responding to an immediate need at the very moment it presented itself. It was the members of that congregation essentially doing what Jesus Christ himself would have done!

We need to love and care for each member of our family- from the youngest to the eldest, the richest to the poorest, the healthiest to the sickest- for Christ has bound us closer together than any blood or national tie. This is what we affirm each time we repeat those baptismal vows during a person's baptism and we find ourselves REAFFIRMING it every time we come together to unite over the Communion table. It is the fact 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 loved by him with the same everlasting love.

Similarly, 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.