

We Are the Body of Christ, Part I: We Are One Family

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I want to express my debt of gratitude to William Willimon for some key insights I gleaned from one of his sermons which have formed a foundation for what I will be preaching this morning.

One of the greatest joys in my life is spending time with my family. We get together at the times when families usually get together—but quite apart from that we hang out and do things together. I love the relationships we have, the conversations we enjoy, and the love and the friendship that these times together nurture. If there's one human experience that's common to all of us, whether we're married or single, it's our family; and even if they're not perfect, we love them.

They're part of us. There are the ties of blood that link us to one another. The bonds are very, very deep. And even the depth of pain that we can experience in our families simply testifies to the depth of the bonds that are there.

Many people join churches because of the support that church gives to family life. It's unfortunate to note that churches generally don't spend nearly as much effort reaching out to single people. When they think about families, they tend to think primarily of the nuclear family unit. In their support of the nuclear family, some churches build family life centers so they can really promote the family and provide support for the marriages and the children who make up its congregation.

It may surprise you to know that the early church was not only very ambiguous, but even somewhat negative about families. That is the reality of what we not only read about in the New Testament, but discover in early church history.

Roman culture was very pro-family. (I'm not suggesting that the church was anti-family. I'm going to explain what their perspective on family is in just a moment). But Roman culture regarded the family as a very sacred institution. It was the center of their entire culture. If you wanted to advance in Roman society, the best way to achieve that goal would be to marry into a family that was better positioned socially than your own.

Marriage was central to everything within the Roman Empire. Because of that the Romans thought

that Christians, by contrast, had a very strange notion of family. They didn't see the Christians supporting the kind of family view that was prevalent within the culture. One of the major criticisms the Roman people had of the Christians, in fact, was that they actually destroyed families.

There are many records that I could read you, letters from Roman officials and people who regarded Christians as being somewhat anti-family. Wayne Meeks, professor of Biblical studies at Yale University, wrote this about the early Christians: "The process of initiation [he means baptism] which makes one a member of this group, [meaning a Christian group] at the same time cuts one off from the other groups that one had belonged to before, perhaps even one's family. And that is the side of it that makes one look like an immigrant."

That was precisely how the Romans regarded the Christians, viewing them as though they were immigrants, even though in many cases they were Roman citizens. They just didn't fit the mold. They didn't fit the prevailing model of family that was prevalent at the time.

This ambiguity that the Christians had about the family, with even a tinge of negativity about it, began with our Lord Jesus himself. Jesus came as the new Creator, to make all things new. Not just to *refurbish* things, or try to shore up broken things, but to make the whole creation new, as scripture testifies.

A key part of the newness that Jesus has come to bring is a new kind of family. He makes this clear in passages like Matthew, chapter 12:46-50: "*Who is my mother and my brothers?*" he asked. He said this as he was ministering in a crowded space, and in response to some people who approached him and said: "*Your mother and your brothers are standing outside and wanting to see you.*" After making that startling response, he went on: "*Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?*" Pointing to his disciples, he said: "*Here are my mother, and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*" Jesus is redefining family.

Why was he interested in creating a new kind of family? I think it's because our natural families are very broken. Important though they are to us, they

simply cannot give us what we need, however wonderful they may be. Jesus wants the family unit also to be part of his new creation.

Families cannot build into us what we need for life. They help us lay the foundations, but they can't give us enough. They're the source of our greatest gifts, but our families are also the source of our greatest wounding. Go to any counselor, go to a psychiatrist, go to anyone involved in mental health care, and share some need in your life. Virtually without exception, they will take a great interest in helping you explore your early life. They will want to know about your family system.

I know a couple right now who are in the adoption process. They told me that one of the things that each of them has to do is to write a detailed and quite demanding essay responding to questions about their backgrounds—the dynamics between their parents, and what went on in their homes. Where we come from determines who we grow up to be.

Our families gave us life. They gave us, hopefully, a safe and secure place to grow and to be nurtured. If we were fortunate, they gave direction to our life, and provided support and encouragement. They helped us to discover meaning. And yet the roots of our struggles: our complexes, our rage, and our confusion, also come from that same family. Jesus understood that. When he asked: "Who is my father and my mother?" he was saying, *"I want to bring my people into a new kind of family. My people need families to nurture them, yet the natural family, good though it is, God-given and divinely ordained though it certainly is, simply cannot bring my people into the dimension of life that I want for them."*

It was on the cross that Jesus began his new creation by creating the new family. Looking down from the cross, and seeing his mother and his beloved disciple John beside her, he said: *"Dear woman, here is your son;"* and to John, *"Here is your mother."* Perhaps John's parents had died. I'm assuming that something must have happened to them; so his words to John meant, *"I'm giving my mother to you, beloved disciple. You're to be a new family now—a family joined not by the natural ties of blood, but through my blood; a family born not through the breaking of the waters to bring that child out of the womb, but a family born through the waters of baptism."* You will recall that when the soldier thrust his spear into Jesus' side, water flowed out of the wound.

It's the blood *and* the water that flows from Jesus that creates the new family that he has come to create. No wonder, then, that the language of family is the most dominant metaphor to describe the church in the New Testament. Listen to Ephesians 4: *"For this reason, I kneel before the Father,"* [just notice the language], *"from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives, He's saying the new family is a family under Father God."*

This new family gets its name from the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Ephesians 2:19 says: *"So you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household."* Notice the word *"household."* So much of the language Paul uses to refer to the churches is family language: *"my brothers"* and *"my sisters."*

Paul's language becomes even more intimate when he speaks about the church as being a body, with all the members belonging to one another. *"We are so integral with family,"* he is saying, *"that our connection is like the connection we have within our bodies, limb to limb."* To go back to Wayne Meeks: *"...the very language that they use [meaning the New Testament people] calling one another brothers and sisters, children of God, and so forth, implies that they have become a different kind of family, a different kind of community."*

In the early church, once people came to profess the name of Jesus they were frequently ostracized. Often they were dislocated people anyway—migrants, or displaced people. I'm going to tell you the story of one of them in a minute.

When these ones came and were baptized into the Christian family, other believers gathered around them and embraced them, often taking them into their homes. There was this extraordinary sense of belonging. That's why Paul, for example, was able to write what he did in I Corinthians 11. He felt the need to criticize the Corinthian church for how they did their "agapé" meals. They would gather together over the food they had brought, and then share it in a way that had a sacramental dimension to it. But how they approached it was scandalous: they were not recognizing one another as family. There were slaves in the church at Corinth. They couldn't arrive as early as the others, nor could they contribute food. They would arrive late, empty handed, and hungry. The other people would never wait for them; when the slaves showed up, the others had satisfied themselves and the tables were empty. Paul

charged them with the sin of not *“discerning the body.”* They were not functioning like a family. *“That’s not how families behave,”* he scolded them. *“In families you wait for each other, you defer to one another, you care for and nurture each other. You’re not functioning as family should.”*

You heard the story read today of the Ethiopian eunuch, and you may have wondered why I chose it. It was selected for a very good reason. The Ethiopian eunuch was the Minister of Finance, or the Secretary of Finance, in Ethiopia. He was a top ranking official in that large country, a man of immense position and power. Just a few weeks after Easter the Holy Spirit says to Philip: *“I want you to go on this particular road.”* And so Philip began moving on the road, and then he saw the chariot. That tells you again about the station of this eunuch—that he even *had* a chariot. You also notice, when he was baptized, that *“he gave orders to stop the chariot.”* He didn’t drive his own chariot; he was way beyond doing those kinds of things. He had a chauffeur, we would say in today’s lingo. When Philip went alongside this chariot, which must have been moving relatively slowly at this point, he heard the Ethiopian reading out from Isaiah chapter 53.

In those days you wouldn’t do what we do when we read anything to ourselves: we read silently. Back then, you would always read out loud, so you could actually hear what you were reading. (That’s why the public reading of scripture helps us to engage in it at a different level than simply reading it to ourselves. It’s not better, but it’s different.) So Philip is able to hear what the Ethiopian is reading. The interesting thing is that he has a Jewish scroll, and presumably has come from Jerusalem and he is returning home to Ethiopia. He’s reading from Isaiah, and has focussed on the passage: *“He was led like a sheep to the slaughter and as a lamb before the shearer is silent, so he didn’t open his mouth. In his humiliation he was deprived of justice. Who can speak of his descendents for his life was taken from the earth?”*

The Ethiopian eunuch was intrigued by this passage, and was apparently reading over and over. When Philip comes up, and they engage in conversation, the eunuch says: *“Can you help me understand what is going on in this passage?”* The passage has really got his attention.

We usually “find” ourselves in biblical passages when it speaks to us very personally, when it’s telling our own story. I’m amazed how scripture can speak

to us in the way that it does. This man sensed that it was speaking to him, but didn’t really know what the message was. Why did that intrigue him so much?

He was reading: *“Who can speak of his descendants?”* (Acts 8:33). This man was a eunuch. Presumably, as a young man he’d been emasculated, as some men were in those days, a cruel thing. And here he was now, a eunuch, with no possibility of ever having any descendants. He couldn’t conceive and bear children. This has got his attention. There’s grief in him. There’s a real sense of loss and deprivation. But now he finds a scripture that tells him somebody else of whom the same thing is true. This is powerful stuff for this man, and he longs to know more about the man Isaiah was talking about. He asks Philip, *“Who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?”* Then Philip begins to open the scripture to him and testify about Jesus.

But there’s yet another reason why this man was intrigued by this passage. He’d come from Jerusalem—that’s the implication in the story. You need to know what scripture says, since this man was apparently at least a seeker, and the Hebrew Scriptures have begun to speak to him. That same Hebrew scripture says something about eunuchs, in Deuteronomy, chapter 23:1: *“No one who’s been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the Lord’s assembly.”* No one. Here was a man who wanted God but was totally excluded from the Lord’s family, the way it was defined under the old covenant. That’s why Jesus had to create a new kind of family that would not have these kinds of restrictions on who was welcome.

Have you ever felt an outsider? Have you ever felt excluded from the Lord’s assembly for any reason at all? I know some people in this church who’ve been thrown out of other churches, literally thrown out. Others have felt rejection, felt that something about them—their speaking in tongues or believing in the gifts of the spirit perhaps—made them a eunuch in terms of their acceptability within that congregation.

So Philip begins to witness to this man, probably telling him that there’s another scripture as well which speaks about the new kind of family. That scripture is also in the prophet Isaiah, and just three chapters after chapter 53 which this man was reading in his chariot. Isaiah 56 says: *“Let no foreigner who has bound himself to the Lord say: the lord will surely exclude me from his people. And let not*

any eunuch complain I'm only a dry tree. For this is what the Lord says to the Eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me, and hold fast to my covenant, to them I will give within my temple and its walls a memorial and a name, better than sons and daughters. I will give them an everlasting name that will not be cut off." Jesus fulfilled that prophecy.

I can imagine the eunuch saying to Philip: *"I can't believe it. I just can't believe what I'm hearing, that Jesus did that for me! Is there any reason I can't be baptized? Here is some water!"* Philip probably gulped and thought: *"Wow, Peter got into a lot of trouble for baptizing a Roman centurion up there in Caesarea. And now I'm going to get it in the neck. Oh what the heck, this is clearly of the Lord."*

They go down to the waters and Philip baptizes him. Think of this picture of the Lord's family: a white Jewish man and a black Ethiopian man going down together into the water. When the Ethiopian eunuch comes out of the water, they embrace as "brothers."

That is the kind of family that Jesus has come to create. No walls. No ethnic differences. Nothing. Nothing at all that would exclude us from being part of the body of Christ. You need to understand, therefore, that Church of the Apostles doesn't *simply* support families (we *do* support them, of course!); but that's simply part of what we do, that's not who we are. The fact is that we are a new family. That is a more fundamental characteristic than simply to say we support families.

We are family! We're not a perfect family. The body of Christ certainly isn't a perfect family. Just read the New Testament! There were issues in the churches, there were things that got between them, and they had to work them through.

Frankly, the eunuch was a very needy man. For all his wealth and position, he was very vulnerable. Hence his reading that passage. He would have needed healing as he came into the body of Christ. He would have needed a new family to come around him and grow him in his new life. He would have had to work through all kinds of issues, and who knows what they might have been? But within the family, he now had hope that he could grow into wholeness.

Here was a family that could give him more than his natural family was ever able to give to him. Why? Because the Lord Jesus is the one who creates this family. And for all the things that we work through together within the body of Christ within this family here, and within any Christian family, if Jesus is central, we know from I John that the blood of Jesus will cleanse us from sin. We know that Christ will be able to turn us into a community without spot or wrinkle or any other blemish.

So long as we enthrone Jesus as Head of this family, and don't simply make it *our* family—in which case it will revert into a club for the like-minded and will start excluding eunuchs again—there is room for us all.

We're all welcome here! When we bear with one another, care for another and share with one another, we grow in all ways into Christ who is our head.

In this new family, water is as thick as blood.