

Your GPS for Life: Family Re-Defined
August 17, 2014; 1 Peter 2:9-12
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Just a few weeks ago we were up in central Oregon for a family reunion – brothers and sisters, children and grandchildren, various levels of cousins. We get together once every two years, so you know it's special. Because our time is short, we intentionally create ways to be together: games, walks, bike rides, swimming, chatting, sharing. Of course, eating is involved – it's one of those things that actually *makes* a family, don't you think? And in our family it's not just about the eating, it's about the cooking. Our kids have gotten to be really GOOD cooks – as in grilled lobster stuffed with scallops and shrimp (and sometimes curried octopus). So that generation has totally taken over the kitchen (and the BBQ), and our generation is happy to let them do it! It's all good – the food, the fun, the laughter. Everyone shares in the responsibilities and we just DO family for a couple of days.

Today we are on the second part of a series on Your GPS for Life. It's a vehicle for sharing with you what I've learned on sabbatical, as we explore together what that might mean for St Timothy's in our discipleship walk. A GPS, of course, gives you a start, a finish and a route. Last week we began with your start, as you go on Pilgrimage, a long obedience in the same direction. As we watched Abraham start his pilgrimage, we found total commitment; you have to be all in. We learned that you travel by faith – which becomes do-able because God keeps his promises. Next week we'll finish up with a vision for the church: Family on Mission. This week we're looking at the route – how we get from here to there. One way to do it is by being a family with one another. A family, as re-defined by Jesus.

How do *you* define family? Well you begin in life with “Me, my parents, my brothers and sisters.” Later it might change a little to “Me, my spouse and our children.” Right? That's family. And then there's extended family – grandparents, cousins and the whole nine yards. And you would be right. That's how God created us. He created Adam and Eve and then said, “Be fruitful and multiply,” and bingo! Family was created. *Family* has been the basic building block of society ever since.

God created us to be family. And then God took family to the next level. He told Abraham, “Your family will become a great nation through whom all the families of the world will be blessed.” And then under Moses, God furthered his plan. By that time, Abraham's family, now called Israel, had indeed become a huge nation. But this nation had been enslaved in Egypt for 400 years; their mindset had been warped, so to speak, to think of themselves as enslaved, oppressed, worthless. They needed a reboot, to be reshaped into the mindset of being a people of God. So God took them out of slavery and told them, “You are a treasured possession, a kingdom of priests, a holy nation.” Can you imagine what that must have felt like, to these former slaves? Imagine all the people on top of Mt. Sinjar in Iraq today, who have been persecuted and oppressed and chased out of their homes. Imagine that someone tells them this: You are a *treasured possession*. That's father-language. That's a dad, cradling his child to his chest, whispering words of love. God also says, “You are a *kingdom of priests*.” So, if everyone in the nation is a priest, then who is the congregation? My friends, their congregation is the world. God was re-shaping them to minister to the world. And third, God told them: “You are a

holy nation.” Holy – that means *set apart*. A holy place – like this sanctuary – is a place set apart for a special purpose, for worship. God’s people were to be set apart to represent God to the world. To show them who God really is. It’s a new mindset.

Now fast-forward to Jesus, more than 1000 years later. He too, re-defines family. He says that family is not just flesh and blood relations; not just the nation of Israel, all related to Abraham, but bigger. Jesus says, “*All who do the will of my Father* are my mother, brothers and sisters.” Did he reject his mother and siblings in that statement? No. He was re-defining the family of God. God, not Abraham, is the Father. And those who obey the Father, like the Son, are his children – and siblings to one another.

This is was a big paradigm shift for the Jews. The Apostle Paul spent his whole life hammering it out: not only Jews, but Gentiles as well, are God’s chosen people. ALL are invited into the family. That’s good news for you and me – most of us here today are non-Jews. You and I have been adopted into the family. In today’s text, Peter borrows language from Moses, addresses all Christians and says, “*You – you who follow Jesus, who are his disciples – YOU* are now God’s holy people.” Listen to his words:

But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession.”

And then he sears these words into their hearts saying,

Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

My friends; these words are as precious as gold. It’s Gospel.

Such good news leads me to hit the pause button. Perhaps some of you feel like nobodies; have been made to feel worthless; you feel left out; you belong to no one. Do you need a reboot? A new mindset? The good news for you today is that God wants to adopt you into his family. In baptism he makes you his own. That means you now have a family. What’s more, all of you, here at St Tim’s, are family to each other.

Let’s take the opportunity to widen our definition of family. First, it means that God is your Father. He has called you by name; you are his. That makes you different. You begin to behave, not like people trying to please themselves (like the culture we live in). Rather, you seek to please the Father, like Jesus did. And over time, you become more and more like Jesus.

First, God is your Father. And secondly, Jesus is your Lord; you follow him. As followers, you need to stick together; that means you do life together. Jesus’ disciples not only learned together; they lived together, traveled together, ate together, cared for one another. And as a group, they also cared for the people who crowded around them. Look at the early church: they shared property and food; they cared for each other in times of trouble. As they scattered under persecution, they would find other Christians and join them, bringing along new Christians. You are a family; welcome and care for each other. Love one another.

So what does that mean for St Timothy's? Because we have always known that we are the family of God. And in many ways we act like it. Working together on VBS, in Choir, in Stephen Ministry, on a work day -- it involves camaraderie, laughter, mutual support and (of course) eating. That's the way it should be, and God' uses those times in wonderful ways. But I wonder if we have missed out on the best part of being family. I wonder if there is still more. What might that look like?

Mission to Mexico is a great example. If you ever wonder why some of the same people want to go again and again, I can tell you it's not for the weather or for comfort. A lot has to do with the satisfaction you get from doing a really good thing for someone else. A great deal has to do with doing the Father's will together. And it has to do with the way we are family to each other. We work together and eat together. When we suffer, we are in it together. We also play games together and eat tacos sold on the street -- and enjoy the fun of that little touristy act. (We also pay for it later.) We worship together -- an incredibly profound dynamic. Although we are of different ages spanning a couple generations or more, we treat each other like brothers and sisters. Age really doesn't make much difference; the one who has the most expertise is the one who takes the lead -- and that might be Steve Hill or his son Joe; it might be Brian Durfey (a teen) or Lisa Furlo (a college student). Social distinctions just fall away; everyone does dishes and cleans bathrooms -- whatever is needed. And then we all celebrate together. It's great; most people sign up again if they can.

What if we were to do that all the time, not just one week every year? This is what I saw on sabbatical. In fact, one of the strongest impressions that I carried away was *the pervasive sense of family*. It was like a family reunion. At St Thomas in Sheffield, the discipleship model has now been in place for some 25-30 years. A whole new generation has grown up with this sense of church as extended family, and it's beautiful to see. Teens hang out with adults -- they want to be there. Children are part of the happy mix. We were invited to individual homes for meals and to spend the evening, and immediately we felt like family -- given little jobs to do, included in whatever was going on. Lots of laughter. Lots of sharing. And finally, worship together -- when the kids prayed for us. It was wonderful. It was distinctive. No wonder it was said of the early church, "See how they love each other!"

The warmth of hospitality is difficult to resist. We need to open our doors to the stranger. Mike Breen, one of the founders of this movement in Sheffield, tells of a young college student who would knock on their door at random times. Well, not completely random; it often happened at mealtime. And they'd just invite her in, put another plate on the table; make room for her in whatever activity they were doing that evening. She came to faith. Over time, she became a second daughter to them. And now she is a leader in the movement -- in fact, she gave the Bible studies every morning. She spoke of that hospitality and what it meant to her, a young woman who had never had a real family. Hers had been broken, dysfunctional. She who had once belonged to no one, now belonged -- to this family -- and to God's family.

My friends, *you* are God's treasured possession; *you* are a kingdom of priests; *you* are a holy nation. You who never knew forgiveness, have been forgiven. You who belonged to no one, now belong to him. And now you bear his name and you have millions of brothers and sisters.

Some of them are right here. Family – that’s your route. That’s what helps you get from start to finish. You were never meant to go it alone.

Our GPS finish will be this: a Family on Mission. That’s the vision. It doesn’t happen all at once; it takes time. But start thinking of it, praying about it, acting on it. Ask yourself and your own household: how can we do this better? How can we take *family* to the next level, at home and here at St Timothy’s? What role can I play? My friends, it’s not just for your sake. It is for the sake of those around you, including those in our community and our world. *That’s* the Father’s will for you. Stay tuned – next week we’ll come to the finish in our GPS for Life. Amen.