

*From the Pastor's Desk:*  
*A Sermon for Sunday, August 21, 2022*

By now, you may have already realized that both the scriptures and my preaching on them require a certain appreciation of the metaphorical and symbolic. Such is the nature of approaching and engaging the sublimely divine. The deeper and more complex the reality, the greater the necessity of metaphorical and symbolic language. Of course, all language is already inherently symbolic – a series of guttural noises or scratched markings on a page that we have collectively agreed mean a certain thing – but even beyond the very nature of language, God-talk language dives deeper in this direction.

I note this from the outset because this is week two of our sermon series on the Church, which is focusing on the three major metaphors from the New Testament for the Church. And this week is potentially more emotionally fraught in the language we use for the Church than any other week, including last week's use of "colony." "Colony" is a politically-charged word, but hopefully you followed my particular use of it well enough to, at the least, appreciate what I was intending by it. At no point in last week's sermon did my appraisal of the Church as "heaven's colony" mean that we were to go on a land-grabbing, body-enslaving, Christian-converting spree all with the aid of the sword. Well, at least I hope no one heard me say that!

This week, however, we're going to focus on the People of God as a "Family," which itself is an extension of the "Family" between the Three Persons of our Trinitarian God. Or, put in theological order, the love each Person of the Trinity has for each other Person of the Trinity overflows and forms the Church into a family too. Who God is, becomes who we are remade as, in community. Accordingly, this week leads us in two emotionally charged directions at once – first to the difficult process of speaking of God rightly and second to the difficult process of speaking of family at all. Allow me, then, to begin with a couple of opening acknowledgements that will hopefully help clear space for us to find our lives joyfully wrapped up in this Holy Family.

To begin, the classic formulation of the Triune God is that of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit." You have heard that formulation spoken at the end of each of my sermons, which – if they are worth anything at all – are only worth it to the degree that they are proclaimed "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." However, it is precisely this formulation – with its gendering of, especially, God the Father – that first feminist and now queer and trans theologians have called into question as troubling. So, allow me to state plainly that while I privilege the traditional formulation in humble deference to the faithful, brilliant saints who have gone before me, I also fully acknowledge that no pastor or theologian worth their salt should die on the hill of strictly or exclusively understanding God as "Father." That is to say, if you say "Mother, Son, and Holy Spirit,"

you are correct. Or, if you desire to escape any binary gendering and say, instead, "Parent, Son, and Holy Spirit," this is correct as well. I will, for my pastoral part, do my best to occasionally change up that language because it is good for our souls to be reminded that God is mystery. However, at no point should my use of, again especially, "Father" language be taken as a literal gendering of God. God is genderless or, if you want to be edgy about it, God is the first non-binary Person ever.

Second, today's New Testament-inspired metaphor of "Holy Family" brings us face-to-face with "family" as we've each experienced it. Sadly – though for reasons we'll soon see, not surprisingly – "family" is rarely, if ever, a strictly positive term. Indeed, for many of us "family" is but the name of the central trauma in our lives – be that the trauma of abuse, neglect, schism, guilt, or simple passive aggression. And, of course, you don't have to scroll very far on the internet to find some sort of click-bait, fear-mongering feature article about the sad state of the family in society today. But even without these journalistic accounts, many of us have families full of conflict... which just isn't how we wish to imagine the Church or our role in it.

I cannot make any quick apologia, then, for our theological use of "Family" language, but I hope that by the end of this sermon, you will come to see that the Church is *not* a reflection of our biological families, but rather that our biological families, if they are to be healthy and functioning at all, must become a reflection of the norms and disciplines of the Church. That is to say, "Holy Family" is not a metaphor at all, properly understood, because the *theo-logic* understanding places the Church first, and thus whatever our domestic situation may or may not be is placed second.

To understand this, we must begin with that classical formulation of the Trinity – that is, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is deeply significant that the Godhead is understood in these relational terms – especially the relational terms of "Holy Parent" and "Son." To be sure, there are other formulations we could use – most notably "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" – but these terms express less who each Person of the Godhead *is* and more, supposedly, what they do. There are two main problems, though, with this appraisal.

First, it is deeply indebted to a capitalist mindset in which even God is painted in terms of God's productivity – that is, the God who creates, the God who redeems, and the God who sustains. But if my incontrovertible truth from last week – namely that identity precedes action – is incontrovertible for even God, then focusing on action without explaining identity makes God unintelligible. I would fully expect that if we left this "Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer" thought run to its logical conclusion, we will one day talk of the Godhead as "CEO, CFO, COO" – that is, God the Father as Chief Executive (because, you know, that's the big boss), Jesus the Christ as Chief

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Financial Officer (because, you know, He paid our debts for us!), and the Holy Spirit as the Chief Operating Officer (because, you know, the Spirit guides our day-to-day actions). Woe be to the Church that lands at this configuration! God must be understood properly in God's identity prior to God's action.

Second, by parceling out God's identity in the terms of God's actions – creation, redemption, and sustainment – we mistakenly assume that, for example, Jesus and the Holy Spirit were *not* present in the Creation (though scripture clearly states otherwise) or that Jesus is not a part of your active sustainment of the faith (though this would also be folly). Indeed, such a formulation is really nothing more than a genteel version of modalism – that is, the Christian heresy that assumes that the three Persons of the Godhead are but just three different modes or expressions of God. And this idea has been considered a heresy since the third century.

So, the Church – as an extension of God's love, grace, and glory – exists as a Holy Family precisely because the Godhead is the first Holy Family. We are who we are because God is who God is. If you understand nothing else about our Reformed theological tradition, I hope it is this much: Any true theological sentence will have God as the subject and us as the object. Just like in English grammar where the sentence “Jeff pets the dog” has “Jeff” as the subject and “the dog” as the direct object, so should our theology always begin with God as the subject who acts upon us, the object. To structure our theology in the inverse is to pretend the veracity of the psychoanalytic criticism of Christianity: namely, that our faith is little more than our personal lives written in cosmic font. We mustn't express our convictions in such a way that Sigmund Freud is proved right on this point!

As a Holy Family born of the Trinitarian Holy Family, the first significant point is that no one comes into this family biologically. Even if you're the sixth generation of Christian to sit in these very pews, you cannot claim your faith by heredity, but rather – as is the case for all of us – by adoption. Every member of this Holy Family is a member via adoption. It's why Paul began our reading from Ephesians the way he did: “He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ.” This adoptive status is part of what saves the biological family from itself. For, who amongst you, remembers a time when, as a child full of frustration with your parents, cried out, “I wish I was adopted”? Anyone? Good news! You are! Not to your parents, of course, but your truest familial identity is that of the adopted child of God.

I realize, of course, that amongst – especially – more conservative or American Evangelical Christianity, there is a “Focus on the Family.” The folly of this line of wanting theology – well, one of them – is precisely in the fact that it hyper-focuses the biological family. It eschews the theological reality that each of us are, first and foremost, the adopted children of God. And by

focusing on the (biological) family, it only exerts that much more pressure on home and hearth to the point that it becomes horror and heresy. The pressure on home and hearth is a product of an idealized biological family with a mom, a dad, 2.3 children, a dog, a cat, and a fish named Gil – all living in a spacious, suburban home into which they fit all the name brand goods marketed to them. Anything short of this and you're accused of failing in the form. To be clear, this assumption derives from culture, not Christ, and thus must be appraised carefully and critically.

The Good News, however, of our adopted status is that the Church has no ideal form we must match. The Good News is that our embodied families can take many forms – single people living as roommates, singles living alone, gay and lesbian couples, childless couples, and – sure – the 2.3 kids to a mom and dad too, but no one of these manifestations rule over the others because each must equally find their identity in the First Family of the Holy Trinity.

This is where I must share how and why this theological truth has been Good News to me and Brianne personally. A little over five years ago, we discovered that the likelihood of our having biological children of our own was nearly nil. At the very least, if it were to happen, it would be nothing short of a B-list miracle. We found our lives outside of that supposed, cultural ideal. While we certainly experienced our own season of sorrow in this revelation, we did not despair precisely to the degree that we first understood our lives as being comprised of the familial identity of the Church. More specifically, we realized that we had sat – countless times – at the baptism of children in the church, and that in each instance we had made certain pledges to help raise them in this faith. Properly understanding, then, the Church as a “Holy Family” meant that we had more children than we had ever bargained for!

Indeed, one of my favorite parts – and one of the most significant parts – of the baptism liturgy is the moment that the parents have to hand over their child to the pastor for baptism. It is significant that parents do not, in that moment, get to cling to their child, as if they own that child, for the very act of baptism is one in which the child is now presented to the entire church as one of their members to be cared for and nurtured by all. Last week, you all heard Amanda make an appeal for nursery attendants. This week, I proclaim unto you, that such work is more imperative than optional. Each of us are called into having a “child-rich” life by dint of the vows we've made at each baptism. And that is precisely how Bri and I have overcome our own personal loss, namely by remembering the great bounty God has placed in our lives when it comes to children. With or without a crying baby at home, we still have a child-rich life, which is a blessing and a duty.

All of this, of course, is only possible because of the reality of a Godhead who is the first

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“Holy Family.” But the joy and glory of this truth extends beyond our adoption and beyond even our responsibility to all of God’s children, but extends into our very inheritance in life. As Paul makes clear, we have been made siblings to Christ, which means we are also co-heirs with Him. Specifically, that means the glory the Son receives in sitting at the right hand of God the Father is a foretaste of our own glory in being adopted into this Holy Family. And that Jesus’ resurrection is a sure promise of our own future resurrection. As it befalls our Brother, Jesus the Christ, so it shall occur in us.

And all of this is Good News – Great News – for our biological families because our biological families presently exist in a pressure-cooker of emotional and relational strain. It is unreasonable and impossible to realistically expect two or three other people in your home to meet ALL of our needs. Yet that is precisely the presumption of any “focus on the family.” Therefore, by recasting our biological families in the light of our theological family, we witness God’s liberating love at work in those biological families. Our family is greater than we imagined and its *pater familias*, its glue, is God, not you. And so, the greatest hope the biological family has can be found in us, the Holy Family. That pressure cooker can get be vented.

This means that our work as the Church, as God’s Holy Family, is found precisely in our extending the siblinghood we experience to everyone we encounter. It is our mission, then, to receive every neighbor – indeed, even every enemy – as an image bearer of God, and a future child of God and a co-sibling in Christ. And by dint of our own adoption via baptism, we are able to do just that; we are able to be a place “Where Christ Welcomes All” – welcomes them into the family, into God’s glory, and into the great inheritance that awaits all God’s children.

In the name of the Mother, and of the Son, and of Holy Spirit. Amen.

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