

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

THE EXTENDED FAMILY OF THE CRUCIFIED


*"For whoever does the will of my
Father in heaven is my brother,
and sister, and mother." Matthew 12:50*

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

MARCH 17, 1974



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
Princeton Theological Seminary Library

THE EXTENDED FAMILY OF THE CRUCIFIED

*"For whoever does the will of my
Father in heaven is my brother,
and sister, and mother."*

Matthew 12:50

One of the "falsisms" that we must continually expose is that God is more to be identified with the country than the city. To ruralize God and urbanize the devil is to indulge in a religion of nostalgia. If God exists at all He is God of every time and place. No more present there than here, then than now.

* * *

Yet, as one who considers himself a champion of the city, I wish to concede the point that family life in a metropolis is generally more difficult than in most towns or villages. I say this because the density of cities virtually eliminates the traditional extended family and puts undue pressure on the nuclear family.

Let's push the stop button long enough to clarify the key terms in that last statement. "Nuclear family" includes mother and father, brothers and sisters. "Extended family" reaches out to include, aunts and uncles, cousins and grandparents.

In smaller communities where larger homes are available, several generations can live under one roof, or several divisions of a family can be located near each other. Hence, a boy growing up in such a place can find more than one definition of maleness. Different models are available to him -- in his father, in his cousins, in his brothers, in his uncles, in his grandfathers.

Likewise, a girl growing up in such a place benefits from a variety of models of femaleness. What it means to be feminine can be ascertained by references to her mother, her grandmothers, her sisters, her aunts and her cousins.

There are some places in the Caribbean where if a youngster has a tiff with his father he simply goes down the street and lives with an aunt or an uncle for a matter of days. No one thinks anything of this. As they say in basketball, "No harm no foul."

In cities, however, with their apartment units and severe space limitations the nuclear family feeds upon itself. A heavy strain is thus generated which accounts for much of our depression and outright mental illness. The plain truth is that no nuclear family, however educated or devout, can fairly represent all the values and life styles that the on-coming generation is curious about. Parents feel trapped, caught in the switches.

Sam Levenson, the humorist, speaks about the problems that we have today trying to be fathers to our children. He said, "When I was a boy my father was the boss. Now I'm a man, my son is the boss. When does it get to be my turn?" 1 Yet, the traditional extended family is usually too scattered to be of any consistent help. As a result, surrogate families are forming in our society. Communal living is a response to the inadequacies of the nuclear family. Communes are springing up all around the country in which several families covenant to live together above the same cellar.

* * *

Perhaps it's time we looked again at the church. This time not as building or as institution but as family. The extended family. The Extended Family of the Crucified. Jesus provides us with our charter for this function. As the Scripture of the day described it, Jesus was teaching when suddenly He was interrupted by a tug on the sleeve. A messenger brought the word, "Behold thy mother and thy brothers stand without desiring to speak with Thee." Here was a common human conflict. Love for God and love for one's family are often held in tension.

One presumes that Mary and the others were well-

meaning, that they were sincerely solicitous of Jesus' welfare. It may be that some of them thought that Jesus was not entirely of sound mind. We read in Mark 3:21 that when Jesus went to his home town to preach, many said, "This man is beside himself."

At any rate, Jesus understood that this intrusion represented by Mary and his brothers was an interference with his life's work. He was made for the ocean and they were trying to hold Him in their little pond. And so He responded, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" He then proceeded to answer his own questions: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." The meaning is clear: spiritual ties take precedence over blood ties!

We cannot use these words of Jesus to justify callous treatment of our parents. The Pharisees resorted to a religious loophole to evade their duty to parents. Jesus sailed into them with great force: "For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother;' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die;' but you say, 'If a man tells his father or his mother what you would have gained from me is Corban' then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on." (Mk. 7:10-13) In those words a none too subtle casuistry was exposed. A man might have certain funds earmarked for his aging parents. But by the simple device of saying "these are dedicated to God," his parents could in no way touch any of the money. Jesus disapproved of this. We are not to understand his words about the extended spiritual family to mean that a person can be indifferent to his own kin.

In His dying hours as He looked down from the cross Jesus saw His nuclear family represented in Mary, and his extended family represented in John. He charged John with the care of His mother. The major point of our text is that Jesus made provision for the extended family of faith. The church understood it thus. A generation later it was the church that preserved the text for us. "For whoever does the will of my Father in

heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."

The church as family. There is much New Testament language to substantiate this hope, plenty of family talk. Men and women are referred to as brothers and sisters. Sometimes within the church family we introduce another by saying, "I want you to meet brother Brown," or "sister Collins." Frequently we smile when we do this as though such references are trite or lacking in sophistication. But is there not something profound, suggestive and beautiful in such references?

Surely it was God's intention that we be to one another as brothers and sisters in the faith. This is why the Bible can speak of the church as "the household of God." (Eph. 2:19)

I have always appreciated the way Dr. Polk leads us into the Lord's Prayer by calling us to pray together the "Family Prayer," for such it is.

The Extended Family of the Crucified in our time can be a bridge between the tight, intense nuclear family of those who are closest to us by blood, and the larger family of man. "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, is my brother, and sister, and mother."

* * *

The church has been serving as an extended family for centuries -- even before the term itself was coined. It remains to be seen whether we can do a better job of it now when the nuclear family is under particularly heavy stress. To get us moving in the right direction I suggest that we must make a determined effort to give up our stubborn ideas about Christianity being a "do-it-yourself," "go-it-alone" religion.

The Old Testament knows nothing of solitary religion. The Hebrews were a covenant community. This is why our Bible is not divided into Part I and Part II, but into Testaments. A testamentary relationship existed between God and the people joined to Him by faith.

There is extant in Protestantism what one might call "the Robert Hall Syndrome." This mentality wants to go right from the "producer" to the "consumer" and eliminate the middle entity. The church has always been suspect in Protestantism, as though the community of believers were a necessary weight that must be borne with. The only authentic action takes place between the soul and God. We did not learn this from the Scriptures!

There are three hundred references in the Old Testament to tribe and family, both of which were understood under the umbrella of faith. The New Testament likewise knows nothing of solitary religion. Just recently I came upon these words by a distinguished Episcopalian of our time, Robert Terwilliger: "On the cross, the people of God was reduced to one; the Old Testament hope that the remnant should be saved was fulfilled, for the remnant was now present in Jesus alone. The church of the Old Covenant passed into the church of the New Covenant in him." 2 Down to one. Yet, from that one a family was to emerge.

In the twenty-seventh Psalm the poet cries, "When my father and my mother forsake me, the Lord will take me up." (Ps. 27:10) How? Through the community, of course! God always reaches people through people. He has no other way.

Wayne Oates, in his soon to be published book, Pastoral Counseling, shares this experience: "A twenty-seven-year-old woman on the first interview with a pastoral counselor said: 'I have lived ever since I have been a Christian on the assumption that with only God's help and my efforts combined I could face life successfully. Now that has collapsed. God and I cannot live life alone. We both need other people.'" 3 That's a profound statement! "God and I cannot live life alone, we both need other people." You need other people through which to receive God's help. God needs other people in order to deliver help.

The church is family, not simply a building to

which we come to do individual things together. Our being together is not incidental but central to our experience.

Beyond this, we must become more aware of each other as persons. It's so easy, even in a "holy" institution, to be concerned about docketts and agendas, flow charts and meetings, goals and programs and budgets.

Some years ago when the British people were in another coal crisis, an economist staggered a group that he was addressing by saying: "The most important product to come out of the mine is the miner." The most important product to come out of the church is a person. How easily we get absorbed in function. We see each other as choir, or deacon, or trustee, or minister, or council chairman or staff. To be family we have to think not functionally but personally.

I'm as happy as the next person to see the church run correctly. I don't think slovenliness is a virtue even when practiced by the ecclesia. I almost had a dream realized many years ago in a church that had developed what I thought was the ideal Christian Education set-up. We had a general superintendent and an assistant superintendent. We had departmental superintendents and assistant departmental superintendents. We had teachers and assistant teachers all the way down the line. What could go wrong with this? Someone to back-stop everyone.

We had two services every Sunday morning in that church. I was sitting down in my office around 8:15 one Sunday waiting for the early service to start when a woman called and told me in a hoarse voice that she would be unable to take her class that morning. Immediately I was angry. Why couldn't she have gotten sick last night when we could have obtained a substitute! She spoiled our plan. I recall how in obvious irritation I told her that I would notify the superintendent. That morning two classes would have to come together under one teacher -- the tell-tale mark of belated arrangements.

All through that first service God spoke to me. Why had I "functionalized" that woman? Why had I not cared about her as a person? What was so almighty important about the efficiency of the church school compared to her? I could hardly wait for the service to end so that I could get to a phone and apologize for making her a "thing."

We all have "life-support" systems. These systems consist of groups of people who are both nourishing and realistic in their relationship to us. They are people whom we can trust, with whom we can be honest and intimate without resorting to any manner of interpersonal gamesmanship.

When we begin to see each other as persons God will give us, hopefully, the willingness to express our love by caring. That's why I call this The Extended Family of the Crucified. We remember Jesus most for His love. In His Crucifixion He gained the scars that have come to stand as symbol of that love. We can love each other because He has so loved us.

It's not all that easy, however. We do not choose the makeup of the congregation, do we? Let me be honest and say that I have never belonged to a congregation whose members I would have entirely selected. Not 100%, no! There's a bright promise at the other end of all of this that John talks about in Revelation. He said, "I saw no temple in the city for its temple is the Lord God, the Almighty, the Lamb. And the city has no need for sun or moon to shine upon it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb. By its light shall the nations walk; and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it..." (Rev. 21:22-24)

Someday the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into the Holy City, but now the people of the earth bring something less than glory into the church. They bring squeaky shoes and greasy noses, bad breath and acne, rude manners and irksome mannerisms. As we meet in the life of the extended family some of us are in the "administrative flats," some on religious "highs," some on religious "lows," some on one of a variety of

personal ego trips. This is our family, our extended family in Christ!!

That's where it's at. We are not here to remake each other but to let each other happen. A certain "letting be" is required of a family. A willingness to let the other pace herself. After all, the first plane wasn't a jet, was it?

Christianity is a "contact" religion. Ken Wilson, a clever editor friend of mine, did a small piece one time that he titled: "It Doesn't Say 'Ye are the Potatoes of the Earth!'" "The point," he said, "is that we usually act as if we had been commissioned to be potatoes, rather than to be salt. 'Ye are the salt of the earth,' Jesus told his disciples. Salt is supposed to do something to something else. If we can get hold of that ordinary, little-obvious fact about salt, it makes life a lot more fun and a lot less burdensome. It doesn't say, 'Ye are the potatoes of the earth.' For then you don't have to be everything and do everything. All you have to do is salt it down." 4 Salt is here to bring out the flavor in something else. You never sat down to French fried potatoes and said, "My, this salt is good." That's what we are here for in the family -- to help each other to happen.

The quality of a relationship is determined by whether what is held in common represents a marginal or central loyalty. There is comraderie at a ball park, but it's not at a very deep level of loyalty. There is hardly the makings of a family there. A couple of people who hold season tickets at the opera might develop deeper ties because at least they meet around an interest of worthier merit. The stockholders of AT&T are not a family because first, they hardly ever see each other, and second, what they hold in common is only the desire for personal gain.

One thinks of the couple that wanted to get married. When the minister asked what they had in common, they replied that they collected the same trading stamps! Not much to go on there.

But in the church we meet around the deepest loy-

alties life can know. This is why family can happen here. The quality of the relationship touches the very heights.

* * *

"For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." The Extended Family of the Crucified. This is what we are here to be. In a time when nuclear families in New York and elsewhere are having a hard go of it, in our large cities where there are numerous "parents without partners" and whole hosts of single men and women, the church has an unusually important mandate to be for all who wish to be included, The Extended Family of the Crucified. We will not know any absolute triumphs nor will we know any absolute defeats, but we will together by the grace of God discover better ways of hanging on.

Martin Marty has given us a delightful book just off the press called, You Are Promise. I close with one of his observations: "What people are learning is to appreciate the intrinsic worth of themselves and others. The promise of a world and of a God of promise. Such a vision will keep them from letting victories lead to pride, or letting defeats lead to despair." 5

CLOSING PRAYER

*God, have mercy upon us for all the ways
- subtle and otherwise - in which we have
remained "non-persons" to each other.*

*Give us a sense of family,
until in the sadness of one
all are heavy;
and in the joy of one
each of us is glad.*

Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Marty, Martin E., You Are Promise, p. 56,
Argus Communications, Niles, Illinois, 1973
2. Terwilliger, Robert E., Christian Believing,
pp. 53-54, Morehouse-Barlow Company, New York, 1973
3. Oates, Wayne, Pastoral Counseling, p. 35,
Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1974
4. Wilson, Kenneth L., Have Faith Without Fear,
pp. 90-91, Harper and Row, New York, 1970
5. Marty, Martin E., op.cit., p. 157

A subscription to the annual sermon series,
SERMONS FROM RIVERSIDE, approximately 40 in
number, may be made by sending a check for
\$7.00 payable to The Riverside Church, to:

The Publications Office
The Riverside Church
490 Riverside Drive
New York, N.Y. 10027