

The Glory of the Family Mother's Day

My mother raised four American children in the jungles of western Ecuador. It was really quite a feat. The social surroundings were Tsachi, a language and culture that were foreign to her. The context was challenging for it was rural and she was a city girl; it was tropical and she was from the Midwest. While none of the four of us is entirely like those raised in the United States, but every one of us is an American citizen, we know American History, and we speak English as well as anything else. In a sense you could say that she grafted us into the American people from afar. That is quite amazing when you think about it, but then, mothers are known for great accomplishments of the heart. Happy Mother's Day to all of you here who are mothers.

This concept of being grafted into something bigger helps us understand today's Gospel. Jesus is the Vine, we are the Branches. As a child is integrated into the culture of his heritage, yet lives it out individually, so we are all connected to God in Christ, and live it out in terms of our particular gifts. Truly the Church is more than just a gathering of like-minded people on Sunday mornings. It is the source of our life, the source of our strength, and the source of our purpose. In this series of sermons on the glory of Jesus today we are going to talk about the glory of His family.

The Family of God is the Church, not the Episcopal Church, per se, nor the Baptist or the Roman Catholic Churches, not even all the people who belong to any Christian church. It is everyone whose hope is in the Son of God. St. Paul in Romans 11 uses the image of being grafted onto the root of the olive tree of Israel. We are those who have been grafted into Christ.

The Family establishes our identity. One year at a falconry meet in Abilene I met a falconer named Tony. Just his name communicates very little about him, but if I told you he had a beautiful hybrid silver gyrfalcon that probably cost him about \$5000 you would know he is a man of some means. But if I told you his last name was Huston, you movie buffs might just figure out that his sister is Anjelica Huston, who is perhaps most well known as Morticia Addams of "Addams Family Values." Identity is established by context. Our context defines us, in giving us parameters in which to exist, and it identifies us, in how we respond individually to the parameters in which we live. The more fundamental the knowledge we have the more we truly know a person. To say I am from Ecuador is one thing, to say I was born the son of missionaries and was raised there is to give you more fundamental knowledge of who I am. The most fundamental thing about you is your relationship with God. Through baptism you are grafted into the Vine, which is Christ. The most fundamental truth about you is: You were once useless, disconnected from the Vine, unable to produce fruit, but now you are grafted in, and draw your life sustenance from that well of the water of life. The fruit you produce are those things you do that express that life through your own individuality. So staying connected to the Vine is your lifeblood, and the context for nurturing that connection is in the family, the fellowship of the other branches.

The Family delivers our resources: We offer an introductory class to the Christian faith, the Episcopal Church and Christian living. The course is divided up into four classes, each with different segments. Class 3 helps students identify those ways that the Holy Spirit has particularly equipped them to serve His kingdom in the context of the Family. This class is very important to the life of St. Christopher's. In Romans 12 Paul talks about us all being part of one body, yet having different functions. Each part, though functioning differently needs the rest of the body to survive and thrive. We need one another for what each one contributes. There is a lot going on here at St. Christopher's, way more than any one of us could lead. But we do so much because we depend on one another. You have a ministry to perform, a purpose for which God put you on the earth. We want to help you discover it, then give you the resources necessary to accomplish it. The primary resource is

the rest of the family. The Father of the Family has provided you with an abundance of brothers and sisters to assist you, and you them. And the service happens in many ways. Recently someone told me how my ministry of pastor had not been sufficient to the need. That person served me well. We are better equipped by those who challenge us than by those who always agree.

The Family identifies our mission. Falconry for me is not an end in itself. Not only do I enjoy the wild game dinners, but my life's mission is to be a bridge between God and people, between people and people, and between people and the earth. The hawks help me nourish my own connections between God and myself, between myself and people, and myself and the earth. The Church is never an end in itself, either. It developed under the clear guidance of the Holy Spirit in order to accomplish something. It came into being in order to proclaim the Gospel. There are hundreds of thousands who do not know their real context, and who are seeking to know, hungry for a taste of genuineness and honest love. It has been said that the Church is the only institution that exists for the sake of those who are not yet in it. It came into being to foster the Kingdom. People come here, they meet Christ, they learn to walk with Him, they are transformed by Him, and they are equipped to take that transformation into the world. Hence our motto: We are a hospital for sinners (as people approach God and are reconciled to Him to one another and to the earth,) and an academy for Saints (equipping those forgiven sinners to go out into the world sharing the same transformation they have experienced.)

Two Scotsmen sat in a pub sipping pints. A hearth kept the winter's chill at bay. The talk turned to religion, and one of the men declared that he had no need of the Church--it's just a bunch of little old ladies and hypocrites anyway. The other, without a word, got up and took tongs, and removed a coal from the fire, laying it on the hearth. Talk wore into the night and finally they rose to go. The first man then queried the second, "Why did you pull the coal out of the fire?"

The second replied, "This coal is like those who say they do not need the family of God." And he picked it up in his bare hands, for while the rest of the coals still glowed hot-red in the hearth, this one was as cold as the floor it lay on. We need the Family of God!