

On being a family

Tim Miller, Gateway Fellowship, 7/9/2017

Family is a word that, for me, evokes a deep sense of belonging. They're your people. The group from which you derive identity. Family is where you learned whether to take off your shoes at the door or not. Whether it's dinner or supper. Whether the eggs should be scrambled, poached, fried, or soft boiled, and how runny or done the yokes "should be." Family is where you learned the importance of music, of work, of play, friends, prayer...everything, really, is caught, more than taught, in those formative years in a family. (Really, all our years are meant to be formative, and there's a truer and deeper for which we are destined...but back to "family.")

Family are the people who are responsible for you, whether they like it or not. The people for whom you are responsible, whether you like it or not. I remember how my sister, Melody, would lay in bed and listen to me unload all my pent up thoughts and feelings at the end of the day with very little advice, but eye contact and brief verbal cues that let me know, "I'm here for you and I care." Hopefully, family are those people who know and love you more than anyone else. Hopefully, you have found a family who you can trust with your true heart. I want that for you. I want that for me. I saw a report that indicated close friends were less reliable than family at assessing a potential mate's compatibility and long term success as a marriage partner. Even though your family annoys you, they'd pick a better spouse for you often than you. I'm not endorsing arranged marriage, I'm just saying.

In the bible, God honors families, not just individuals. Did you ever notice that? He'll even honor your prayer because of a promise he made to your ancestor you never met. Even if you've been a royal butthead, it's possible that he will extend extra grace to you because he had a great relationship with your great great grandma and one afternoon he promised her some stuff and now it involves YOU.

I come from a terribly individualistic culture, but even I can see in scripture this theme of God keeping covenant with families, and once we read scripture with a family lens on, we find it everywhere, and it is difficult to unsee.

God calls Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 tribes. He saves them through Moses hundreds of years later when they've become a huge nation and tells them his name more clearly, saying that he keeps covenant down through the family lineage for a thousand generations. He has a much wider view, and he sees us as connected, not separate.

In the New testament, we find the same love of genealogy that we found in the OT. How does Matthew start the story of Jesus? With one of those boring lists of names! From Adam to David to Christ. Why isn't that boring to a Jewish reader? Because it's THEIR genealogy! When we realize that it's OUR story, and that each name represents a vivid life story where WE are

rescued by God's grace, it becomes less boring to us as well. And the truth is, it is our story — the story of God being really good to Abraham's family in order to include all the families of the world in that goodness by grafting us into that family.

In Ephesians 3:15, Paul prays to the Father “from whom every family on earth and in heaven is named...” The word for family is “patria,” while the word for father is “pater.” Every child with their father an imperfect and miniature expression of that greater kingdom reality, and more to the point, intended to be grafted into that greater Family of God to find the full expression of divine design and blessing.

The church is called the household of God (**Eph 2:19**). Saints are the siblings of Jesus (**Rom 8:29**) and he's not ashamed to call us his brothers (**2:11**). His Father is our Father. His siblings are our siblings.

Many of us would say we came from a bit of a dysfunctional family. All of us would admit that we came from an imperfect family with lots of room for improvement. Perhaps your family's brokenness has marked you with fear that you will repeat the sinful patterns of the past over again in your marriage or with your children. Or perhaps what your family got right has lured you into a smug sense of self-satisfaction that renders you less loving and more judgmental to others. What I hope is the case is that an accurate awareness of our family's mixed blessing has deepened within us a sense that the saving grace of our lives has not been us, but God's undeserved and ongoing involvement.

This family reunion, I got to hear a “behind the scenes” side of my grandpa Dave and grandma Laura's story (both in heaven). I knew they sometimes were cross with each other. Laura was prone to depression — I think her Wagler side is where I get my artist's touch of melancholy, which is a sincere burden on my wife. Pray for us - since we're connected, my lack of joy has profound ripple effects! Years ago grandpa Dave (I'm Timothy David for him) commented that it is nothing but the grace of God that he can credit for how all five of his sons turned out as well as they have. Kids like *that* somehow happening with parents like *us...I won't take credit, but I will give thanks*. I know my dad feels the same about me and my sisters. I find that a good thought to remember when I'm sure I'm royally screwing up my kids.

Another beautiful kingdom snapshot from my week: My little sister sharing with all the aunts and uncles and cousins about her divorce. We cried together. We got to walk with her a ways on that holy ground of grief. We got to experience that sacred honor of helping bear her burden. It's amazing what you'd be happy to suffer if you care. Then dad shared about how impressed he was with the total lack of judgment he experienced from his siblings as he processed his grief over it. I joked that what Lynette really needs is stacks of books just filled with advice and snap judgments.

I had been asked to give the sunday message - my dad and I tag-teamed. He was supposed to give a short talk but got carried away, so I gave the short talk. :) He talked about how

Colossians says that all things were created by Jesus and for Jesus (**Col 1:16**) - which means God created the universe so diverse and beautiful not so that people would get to enjoy it - as though everything is about us. No, God created everything because he liked to create it and he enjoys what he created whether any human eye or telescope or submarine ever finds it and photographs it. Then he went on and on about bird migrations and strange nesting behaviors of obscure creatures, all while some snake-skins we found in the meeting area as we gathered were draped over the pulpit (Eastern Diamondback Rattlesnake skins, to be precise).

So I just talked about how important it is to sow our tears, not stuff them or dump them, and I encouraged us to sow them first with God, and then with trustworthy people. I was so encouraged to hear so many different people track me down individually to say, "I needed that." One was my aunt whose sister took her life a few years ago. Another was my little sister who doesn't have a church family right now. Another was an uncle who told me how he had been so angry with God and would pray angry prayers and write poems of his grief, and it was only when he was able to share that pain with people that it's power was broken and his heartfelt trust in God returned.

We are all kind of a mixed blessing, aren't we? We come from families that have shaped us, for good or bad. And we're all called to find our much deeper place of belonging and responsibility, but most importantly, GRACE, in God's family.

What if you've never had a family like that? You know, Jesus' little piece of advice on how to rearrange our lives - the one about not reacting defensively to people, but anticipating actively and creatively what we would want if our roles were reversed and then acting powerfully to do that. Golden rule, we call it. **Luke 6:31**. Act how you would want to be treated. Take the brave first actions. Then take the brave second actions. If you wish you had a listening ear, ask questions and care about answers. If you wish someone had shown you more grace when you were in a bad place and acting ratty, be kind to someone who is being intentionally hurtful. If you wish someone would have confronted you with truth, but stayed cheerfully affectionate with you and let the matter go as soon as they gave their opinion — in other words, if you wish people to be honest but not manipulative — be that for others. In other words, we actually have the power to live this out for others before they live it out for us.

So what in the world does it mean for us as Gateway to be a family? I honestly don't really know fully. I have a few hunches. I have a hunch that it means church isn't a worship service once a week. It's people who do life together. Who talk a lot. Eat a lot of food. Host each other in their homes. Our kids play together. Grow up together. Maybe get married, weirdly enough. I think it means you know my strengths and weaknesses and can sort out how to love me as a total package, and I do the same with you. I think it means you love me enough to risk vulnerability with me. It means we hug. It means we sometimes fight. It means that we forgive each other. It means that we share the load. We share the joys. We share the journey.

I don't know. But I do know that Anthony put this word, "family," in my mind a few months back, and it has stayed around. It keeps coming back, like a little shy white butterfly who won't be chased away, but won't let me hold it either. I suspect that God has given each of you a sense of what it means for us to be a family, and that without your piece to the puzzle, we won't get to see what it looks like.

What if you never had a healthy family? You know, Jesus' little piece of advice on how to rearrange our lives - the one about not reacting defensively to people, but anticipating actively and creatively what we would want if our roles were reversed and then acting powerfully to do that. Golden rule, we call it. Act how you would want to be treated. Take the brave first actions. Then take the brave second actions. If you wish you had a listening ear, ask questions and care about answers. If you wish someone had shown you more grace when you were in a bad place and acting ratty, be kind to someone who is being intentionally hurtful. If you wish someone would have confronted you with truth, but stayed cheerfully affectionate with you and let the matter go as soon as they gave their opinion — in other words, if you wish people to be honest but not manipulative — be that for others. In other words, we actually have the power to live this out for others before they live it out for us.