

**“We Are Family”
Rev. Bill Freeman
Sunday, May 7, 2017
Menifee United Church of Christ**

Grandpa is sitting in his living room. His little grandson comes running into the living room and says, “Grandpa, Grandpa, can you make the same sound as a frog?” The Grandpa says, “I don’t know. why?” The little boy says, “Because Grandma says we can go to Disneyland as soon as you croak.”

Ah, families! Wonderful memories, usually. I hope you have many happy memories. I know there are those who don’t, who have unhappy memories. That’s too bad. But, as they say, it’s never too late to have a happy childhood. I take that to mean that you can isolate just the happy times you had as a child and focus on those, then you can have a happy childhood and not isolate the times that you had an unhappy childhood. Focus on the happy times and remember those. But, as they say, it’s easier said than done. I hope you had many happy memories in your family.

A family has many definitions. A husband and a wife and a kid can be a family. A family can be a husband and a husband and a kid. A family can be a wife and a wife and a kid. A family can be a single mom and a kid. A family can be a single dad and a kid. A family can be a grandparent and a kid. In Utah, a family can be a husband and a wife and a wife and a wife and a kid. In Kentucky, a family can be a cousin and a cousin and a kid. A family can have many definitions.

Kathleen and I have a family. It’s scattered all across the country, but we have a family. My daughter, her two children and her grandkids, they make up a family. Throw in parents and aunts and uncles and siblings and nieces and nephews and cousins by the dozen and a dog and a cat and we have a family all over. I know many people here have scattered families all across the country, but it’s good to have a family...for the most part. I hope you all have happy families.

Jesus’ followers were a family, in a way. After Jesus died, his followers were like a family. They broke bread together. They prayed together. They studied the scripture together. They learned from the apostles together. They were amazed by the wonderful things the apostles could do. They belonged to a family. Interestingly, they pooled their resources, and divided them among themselves and gave as any had need.

Karl Marx, who lived in the 1800s, said, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.” Sounds almost like the early Christians, but it’s the essence of Communism. Were the early Christians some of the first Communists? I can almost hear Aretha Franklin in the Blues Brothers movie saying to me, “Don’t you blaspheme in here! Don’t you blaspheme in here!” I’m just making an observation. What would Jesus say?

Jesus didn’t have a traditional view of the family. You will remember the gospel story, perhaps, where it says that Jesus was surrounded by a crowd of people, when his disciples told him, “Jesus, your mother and brothers are here.” Jesus said, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Anyone who does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister.” So, we are all part of Jesus’ family, the family of Jesus, his brothers and sisters, whenever we do the will of God.

“Family values” is an interesting phrase. Some churches say they have family values, but I think what they really do is devalue families. They have family values for traditional families, but they devalue same sex families, gay families, lesbian families, and that isn’t a sign of family values to me. Just this past week, someone spray painted our rainbow flag on the sign by the parking lot. They painted it black. Now maybe they were trying to say, “Black Lives Matter” – I’m not sure – but, apparently, that wasn’t a family value. Kathleen, by the way, put several rainbow stickers over the spray painted rainbow flag, so now we have another, bigger, rainbow flag. I think that demonstrates our family values.

The Benedict Option is something I’ve been reading about lately, and maybe you have, too: In the Christian Century, The New Yorker, and The New York Times. It doesn’t have anything to do with Benedict Arnold; it has to do with Saint Benedict. The Benedict Option is where Christians, usually conservative Christians, separate themselves from the rest of society, or what they call the post-Christian society, and they’ve created their own kind of Christian communities. In part, they do it, as I understand it, from one example, they do it so Christians don’t have to serve people who have gay weddings, they don’t have to sell flowers or make cakes for people having gay weddings. Again, probably an example of family values that I don’t really value, but I just thought we should know about these different families.

Desmond Tutu values families, all families. Desmond Tutu, as you probably know, is a retired Anglican archbishop from South Africa. Desmond Tutu says that our families are gifts to us from God, and we are gifts from God to our families. Isn’t that wonderful? Our families are gifts from God and we are gifts to our families. I realize that some people would like to return their gifts of families, but I think, for the most part, it’s a wonderful sentiment.

Families can be a delusion sometimes. If you go to the same bar every night and have a drink, or a few drinks, and talk with the bartender, that might feel like a family, the relationship you have with the bartender. But it’s kind of dependent on you

buying drinks. It's not so much familial as monetary, because, if you stopped buying drinks at the bar, the bartender would ask you to move along. Then maybe you'd go to a restaurant.

A restaurant recently had an ad that said, "When you're here, you're family." Isn't that nice? But, you're probably not. If you went into that restaurant and said to the greeter, "Hey, family, I'm running a little short on cash. Could you give me a hundred bucks?" they probably would not. They'd probably give you the bum's rush. They'd probably toss you out on your ear. Or on your rear. Which, granted, some families might do the same, but hopefully not.

This church is a family, when you think about it. We break bread together, we share a meal after church, we study the Bible together, we study a book together, we go to movies sometimes to discuss a movie together. We have family meetings – we call them "the Council," "Trustees" and "Diaconate" – but they're kind of like family meetings. We reach out to our older members – we call it visiting shut-ins. We help people inside the church and outside the church with food, clothing, money sometimes. We help those outside the church who are in need. We help people inside the church who sometimes are in need. So, this church is like a family.

America – is it a family? Do we help each other out, the way the early Christians did, help those who need help? Do we follow the early Christian teachings? Do we follow the teachings of Jesus? Or, do we follow the teachings of Ayn Rand and say, "I've got mine, forget about you"?

The preamble to the Constitution talks about how we are to promote the general welfare, to help those who are in need. When we think of those words, would we be a family, if we help those who are needy, who are in need of some sort of assistance? Would we then be like a family?

Many Christians would like for the government to be a Christian government. If we have a Constitution that talks about "we the people," then I guess "we the people" are the government. "We the people" are the American family. So, if we were a Christian government, would "we the people," the American family, help those in need? Would we, if we were a Christian government, help people who need health care, for example? I don't have to tell you what recently happened in Congress, where up to 24 million people in the American family may soon be without health insurance. If we were a Christian nation, would we make sure that all the public-school children get a good education? If we were a Christian nation, would we make sure that women who need help from Planned Parenthood got that help? It seems to me that if we were a Christian nation, we would do all those things, but I might have a different definition from those who call for a Christian government. I think you could be a Christian government if you actually follow the principles of Jesus. If we were a Christian nation, that might be something worth singing about.

A group of women sing about being a family. Sister Sledge had a song years ago about "We Are Family." Sister Sledge sings, "We are family. I got all my sisters with me. We are family. Get up everybody and sing." When we are a family, when we truly are one, big, happy family, it's worth singing about it.

Happiness is what all of us should hope for, according to the Dalai Lama. The Dalai Lama says that's the goal of life – it's to be happy. So, if we were one, big, happy family, that would be a wonderful thing. But how, as Christians, do we achieve happiness? I think it's by following the commandments of Jesus, who said to love God, love others, and love ourselves. If we do that, I believe we will be happy, and we'll have a happy family.

What about you? Did you have a happy family, a happy childhood? I hope so. And I hope that you, at least now, have a happy family as an adult. If you are able to love God, to love others, and to love yourself. I think, when you do that, you can have a happy family, you can have a happy church family, you can have happy relationships all over.

The early Christians set the bar kind of high for this kind of thing, to have a happy family, to be loving of everyone, including ourselves, including, of course, God. If we're willing to do that, we will be happy, we will have a happy family. And maybe happy families can get to Disneyland before Grandpa croaks.

Let us pray:
God of love,
Help us to emulate the early Christians.
Help us to have a happy family at home,
And help us to have a happy family at church.
Now and forevermore.
By the power of the Holy Spirit.
And in the name of Jesus.
Amen.