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10.17.10

I John 2:12-14 / Ephesians 2:11-19

## Family Matters

*Do you remember the words of this song? "Eleanor Rigby picks up the rice in the church where a wedding has been, lives in a dream; waits at the window, wearing the face that she keeps in a jar by the door, who is it for?"*

*"Father McKenzie writing the words of a sermon that no one will hear; no one comes near. Look at him working, darning his socks in the night when nobody's there. What does he care? All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"*

*And it ends, "Eleanor Rigby died in the church and was buried along with her name, nobody came. Father McKenzie wiping the dirt from his hands as he walks from the grave; no one was saved. All the lonely people, where do they all come from? All the lonely people, where do they all belong?"*

Believe it or not, it's been 44 years since the Beatles first sang that song, and you know what stands out to me about it? Not only the loneliness of the people in it, but the fact that the human condition hasn't changed one bit since then, even with all our advances in communication technology—cell phones, voice mail, internet, text messaging. People are still lonely longing for a little bit of human kindness and companionship. Hasn't that been true of you? Haven't there been times in your life when you've felt completely alone and without the kind of support you've needed?

*I'm looking back a long way now, but that was my life as a young person. I grew up in a home where I was well provided for but there was no open, heartfelt communication between us—my mother, my father, my three sisters and me. For example, my mother, who was previously married before she met my father (so my older sisters are both half-sisters, she was so ashamed of having married someone who went to prison that we were never allowed to talk about anything that went on before she met my dad. Nor were my sisters ever allowed to tell anyone that they'd been molested as little girls. Is it any wonder, then, that they still have emotional problems today? I should add that my dad also worked 6 days a week and slept all day Sunday making me one of the loneliest little boys you've ever met, which isn't to say that I didn't have friends. I had three best friends in grade school, each of whom moved away within a year of our becoming best buddies.*

*So I know what it's like to be lonely! But then 3 things suddenly happened in quick succession that changed my life forever, and I haven't been the same since. I gave my life to Christ my second year of college, so that even during my loneliest hours, I now had assurance that He was with me whether anyone else was or not. I joined a Bible-believing church and got*

***involved in several different ministries, which I believe is the very best way to make friends, and I also married Cheryl, the pastor's daughter, who is the most loving and loyal person I've ever met in my life, and I haven't had even one moment of loneliness since then!***

I share that as a testimony to God grace who doesn't want us to suffer ongoing loneliness. That's what hell is, I'd remind you, loneliness carried to an eternal degree which we know He doesn't want us to suffer because He gave His only Son to die for our sins. Nor does He want us to suffer loneliness in this life. Psalm 68 promises two of the blessings that have changed my life: "A father to the fatherless and a defender of widows is God in his holy dwelling." That is to say, even if everyone else abandons us, He remains true to us giving us all the comfort and encouragement we need. And verse 6 continues: "God places the lonely in families and sets the prisoners free giving them joy." God cares very deeply about our need for companionship and has therefore given us an eternal family, so that even if our friends betray us or our loved ones are taken away from us in death, this family remains. What family is that? The eternal family made up of redeemed sinners called the church. You'll remember Peter asked Jesus at one point in His ministry, "Lord, we've left all we had to follow you. So what will we receive?" "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them, "No one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of God's kingdom will fail to receive many times more in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life."

That, then, is the topic we want to address this morning and the next several weeks together—that eternal fellowship of believers who love Jesus just as much as we do and with whom we're going to spend forever because of his great love for us. Over the next few weeks, we're going to see it pictured in many ways—as a bride, a temple, a priesthood, a flock, a vineyard, and a body. But this morning the picture is that of a family where we can give and receive unconditional love and acceptance just as we are in spite of all our faults and flaws. And to appreciate what a great family this is, there are two facts I want to emphasize in our time together, and the first one is—

### **1. Our Family Members**

The first passage I want us to look at is tucked away in the little book of 1 John where he describes the membership of the church dividing it into 3 stages of spiritual growth. He says in verse 12, "I am writing to you little children because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake. I am writing to you fathers because you know him who is from the beginning. I am writing to you young men because you have overcome the evil one." John describes 3 groups of believers—children, young men, and fathers. Then to give double emphasis to what he's said, he goes back and repeats it: "I have written to you children because you know the Father. I have written to you fathers because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you young men because you are strong and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one."

John describes 3 groups of believers in the church, each one at a different stage in their spiritual growth. Children is the word "paidia", from which we get the word "pediatrics," referring to the new Christians in the church who are just beginning to walk with Christ, and according to John, what is it that is apt to knock them off their spiritual feet? The fear that their sins haven't been forgiven and they've somehow lost their salvation! And I don't know if you've ever felt this fear,

but I can tell you from personal experience, there is no greater fear for a child of God than to think you'll be separated from Him forever! And I'm sure it was something in my family background, but that's something I worried about every day as a new believer. "After all, I'm so sinful, and He's so holy. How could He ever forgive me?" Then I finally got my spiritual legs under me, and what hit me next? That verse about the unpardonable sin, which the devil twisted in my mind, so that I thought I'd committed it and was beyond the reach of God's forgiveness! That's a fear I fought for months, searching the Scriptures for some kind of assurance, which I finally got by realizing, as John says here, that our sins have been forgiven not because we've earned it or because we deserve it or because there's something in us that's worth forgiving. Little children, the reason our sins have been forgiven is for His name's sake! So that everyone who ever meets us will see the greatness of His grace—that Jesus Christ is so good and powerful that He can even forgive sinners like you and me!

That underscores a second truth and that's the need for every new believer to have an older brother or sister in Christ who'll come alongside of them and help them gain an assurance of salvation, because as long as we're in doubt about that, we aren't going to be good for anything! And I admit, we haven't always done a good job at this, but we're going to do better at it because this is our purpose as a church—to become and reproduce fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ who are strong in every area of our faith, and the first step in doing that is assuring them that God really does love and forgive them. In fact, I'd like to take a little poll and ask: How many of you had an older Christian who helped you get started in the faith—showing you how to read the Bible and pray and get an assurance of salvation? Not many! And I won't ask you to raise your hand on this next question but how many would have liked that or would like it even now? That's our first duty to new believers! In fact sometimes I'll hear someone say, "Why don't we see more people getting saved in our church!" There are two answers to that question. I'll give you the second answer in a moment, but the first one is this: If you were a good parent, as many of you are, and you had to find someone to raise your children for you, who would you pick? Some-one who's ready to take care of them or someone who likes to hold new babies but is totally unprepared for the task? The point is: God is a good father who only entrusts His babies to churches ready to take care of them because that's what babies need which means we're the ones who decide how many new believers God gives us by being ready to follow them up!

Young men, on the other hand, refers to those who've overcome the lies of the devil and graduated from spiritual kindergarten! How did they do that? By spending lots and lots of time in God's Word not only learning what to believe, but why we believe what we believe—why we believe that Jesus is Lord and that there's One God who exists in 3 Persons, why the Bible is the inerrant Word of God and salvation is by grace through faith alone. That's how we take up the sword of the Spirit, grow strong in the faith, and extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. We do it by spending lots of time in this Book! But young men can also be cocky and careless when using a sword, causing unnecessary conflict and doing more harm than good, until our passions are tamed by the love of Christ. So where do we turn in the meantime so the children are fed and the young men, who are ready to fight, get the mentoring they need? We turn to the fathers who still have a firm grasp on the truth and can still fight if they need to but who know something even more important than how

to defend the truth. They know Him who has been from the beginning and have spent so much time in His presence that they know almost by instinct what His heart is saying to them. So even though we have, like most churches, lots of spiritual children and young men in our family, what we need more of are fathers who can give us the faith, the hope, and the love we so desperately need!

***Corinth is the perfect example. You've read Paul's letters to the Corinthians, haven't you? If so, then you know it was by far the most carnal church in the New Testament filled with factions following their favorite teachers. How did it get that way? I don't know if you've ever noticed this in reading the letters but it's because there wasn't even one leader in the church who qualified as a godly leader!***

***Check it out when you get a chance and you'll find that there isn't even one reference to the elders of this church in any of its 28 chapters! This church was in constant conflict and chaos because they had no spiritual fathers who could calm things down. And yet, as badly as they behaved, their Heavenly Father never gave up on them, but sent them an apostle named Paul to put things in order.***

These are the members of God's family—the children, the young men, and the fathers. But we can't stop there because what every family also needs, so they can live together without unnecessary conflict are ground rules that soften our behavior because the fact is we're all hard to live with. I am and that's right, so are you! We all have these rough edges that rub others the wrong way, which is how God intended it because that's how we wear down the rough spots and become that kind and loving family and those kind and loving children He wants us to be. But we don't want too many sparks flying, and so to reduce the friction between us, God has given us ground rules by which we can soften our behavior, and that's the second thing I want to look at together—

## **2. Our Family Rules**

***In our family growing up, we didn't have a lot of rules. Nothing was ever said about watching too much TV as long as we got our homework done and did well in school. Nor was much said about avoiding junk food like Hostess Twinkies and Doritos and all the other things that are bad for you! And as long I didn't get in trouble, I never really had a curfew once I started driving. By and large they trusted us and expected us to rule ourselves based on what they'd taught us.***

***But there was one area in which there were very strict rules and that was the area of interpersonal relationships. For example, there was a zero tolerance rule when it came to fighting with each other as children. That was something my dad wouldn't put up with, and that included fighting about what we were going to watch on television. We could watch whatever we wanted because there were only 6 channels in those days and there was nothing on them that was going to corrupt our morals. The problem was finding something we could agree on because in those days nobody had more than one TV in their home! But if my dad heard us arguing, snap! The television would immediately go off and, "If you keep fighting with your sister, young man, you can spend the rest of the evening in your room. After all, you're older than she is, and you ought to know better!"***

***Do you know how much I hated hearing that last line? But he was right! I didn't appreciate it at the time, but then I began to follow Jesus, and guess what His Spirit began to teach me almost from day one! That's right! The ground rules for behavior in His family, and it shouldn't have surprised me, but what I soon discovered is that the same thing that mattered to my dad also matters to our Heavenly Father, and that's the interpersonal relationships between His children.***

Listen as I read another key section of Scripture, this time from Ephesians chapter 4. Last week we studied verses 8 to 16. This week I want to look at the end of the chapter starting with verse 25, where Paul emphasizes two basic ground rules in how we relate to each other, the first of which is truthfulness leading to unity. Listen as I read starting in verse 25. He says, "Therefore, each of you must put off falsehood and speak truth-fully to his neighbor for we are all members of one body. In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need. Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen."

The emphasis here is on honesty—no more lying, stealing or cursing, which is what some of us used to do when we got angry, but sharing with others, speaking the truth in love, and sometimes biting our tongues and leaving some things unsaid. You see, one of the misconceptions today is that you aren't being real unless you let it all out. And as Dr. Phil would say, "How's that working for you?" If you've been married long, you know that doesn't work well at all. I don't mean by that that we should stuff those things that we really need to talk about. What I'm saying is if you aren't sure, then you should probably wait. Proverbs 17:28 says, "Even a fool is thought wise if he keeps silent and discerning if he holds his tongue." But then you don't want to wait too long either and let the house burn down around you. And to be honest with you, I still make a lot of mistakes along these lines. I've been a Christian and a husband going on 37 years now and I still have trouble finding the right balance between what I say, how I say it, and where, when, and with whom I say it. But we need to keep working at this with the help of the Holy Spirit and the feedback of our friends, because this is a critical issue when it comes to the unity of the church.

***This last Sunday, for example, if isn't too sensitive a subject to talk about, I thought there were some very good questions asked at our business meeting and that by and large our people were very polite and respectful, and I appreciate that about you. Compared to some of the other church business meetings I've been at, this one was fairly tame. Do you know I attended a business meeting years ago at the church Cheryl's dad was pastoring and one of the men in the meeting who'd hoped he'd be nominated for deacon (we didn't have elders at that time)—was so disappointed he jumped to his feet in the middle of the meeting and assuming her dad had torpedoed his nomination, shouted: "Pastor, you're nothing but a Hitler and you run this church like a dictator!" And I've attended other meetings where equally bad things were said. So by that standard, our meeting was fairly tame. I also want to thank those of you who participated for caring so much about our church—200 people coming out on a Sunday***

***afternoon and staying more than three hours to listen to reports and ask questions. That's incredible!***

***But it wasn't without tension and strong emotions, and the danger with strong emotions is that they can make us come across like it's "us vs. them," and I know we don't want that because as Paul reminds us here, there is only one First Baptist team, and we're all members of one body. So the last thing we want to do is split up into teams. For example, one of the ways we could have communicated that, unintentionally I'm sure, was by clapping when we agreed with whoever was speaking. And the last thing we wanted to do stifle discussion at our meeting, but I think if I had to do it over again, I would've encouraged us not to clap and cheer like we did because feelings can get hurt by something like that. I know that's true of our elders. They're big people, but they've also spent hundreds of hours the last few years dealing with one financial or personnel crisis after another, and we've all made mistakes along the line, but not intentionally—often it's been the result of mental and emotional fatigue, which can lead to discouragement like it has the last few days. So I hope you'll take time to pray for them and encourage them, because we're all part of the same body, serving on the same team. Amen?***

One more rule before I stop especially for those of you who've been hurt by one thing or another or had people rub you the wrong way, and that's forgiveness empowered by love! Verse 30 says: "And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you." And chapter 5, verse 1 adds: "Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children and live a life of love just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

Paul says we need to make a habit of seeking and granting forgiveness because we all hurt one another in many ways. That's something I had to do with a couple of people I hurt last week, and I also happened to hear a couple of people praying for the same thing in our small group. And when we ask God for forgiveness, He gives it to us freely because that's the very reason His Son died for us. But it doesn't come as easily for us. And that's OK as long we're letting God work in our hearts and we're trying to restore the relationship, because the last thing we want to do, as Paul warns us in verse 30, is grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom we were sealed for the day of redemption. Because all it sometimes takes is one bitter, unforgiving heart or one stubborn will refusing to say, "I'm sorry," to quench the work of the Holy Spirit and the blessing He wants to pour out on a church, and I do not want to be guilty of that, do you? So let us be open and honest with one another but always in love, and when at times we fail to do that, which we'll surely do, let's remember to apply the healing balm of love and forgiveness because as Peter says in another place, "Love covers a multitude of sins."