

An Old Family Recipe

Texts: Ephesians 4:25-5:2; I Corinthians 13:1-8a, 13

Do you like big family gatherings? When my family had a Blair family gathering of all my siblings, their children, and my cousins together, it was a lot of fun. Family gatherings are frequently a time of swapping stories, of remembering family anecdotes, of sharing family histories - from genealogies to recipes. Children overhear snippets: "Do you have Aunt Cissy's sour cream peach pie recipe?" "You know the story of great grandmother Ruth..." "Did you go to Mary's graduation?" "Is Uncle Tim talking to his brothers?" Oh dear! Were there times when as a child and you overheard your parents arguing with your aunts or uncles or grandparents? Families can be wonderful, but they are sometimes not very loving or kind, are they? Did you ever wish that the old family recipe box included a step-by-step recipe for how to help family members to get along with each other?

The biblical writers understand this mixed-up nature of families: families can be loving and healthy; families can be hurtful and destructive. Most families have both kinds of characteristics. Yet in spite of our human experience of family, or perhaps because of it, family is a major metaphor in the Bible for our relationship to God in Jesus Christ. Remember – in baptism, as I have said many times here, we in the church are made one family, Christ's family, with the name "Christian" added to our secular names. Today little Abram has become an official member of this large, world-wide, extended family of Jesus Christ.

As Christians, we are expected to love each other. Indeed, Jesus commanded it in his last teaching to his disciples: *"I give you a new commandment (in Gk., a new command, new order), that you should love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:34-35).

Paul picked up on this, and stressed over and over again in his letters that love is the heart of the Gospel. If you were only given one word to summarize the Christian faith, it would be "love," wouldn't it: God's extreme love for us; our great commandment to love each other and our neighbors. And so we have the most beautiful passage in the Bible for our reading today, that wonderful passage from I Corinthians 13. But this passage is more than poetic and lyrical: it is extremely practical and concrete. It points out that love is more an action than a feeling; it is more about behavior than emotion. Love is acting patient and kind; it is bearing,

believing, hoping, and enduring all things for another. Love is also not acting on one's feelings: not being envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable or resentful, or insisting on "my" own way. It is not rejoicing in wrongdoing – it is the action of rejoicing in truth. Do you see how concrete all this is? Love is action, good behavior, whatever our feelings may be.

The letter to the Ephesians is the place in the Bible where we learn the most about how we, the church, Christ's family, are to live a life of love with each other. This letter provides us with what we need: an old recipe for how to act, how to live, and how to get along with those we are with; it's an old family recipe for love.

Our reading today has a list, a series of injunctions: put away this, do this instead - each set a suggestions of ways that we "put on a new self" in Christ. Now, you may already be mentally yawning. Lists like this in the Bible may remind us of the old joke about Herbert Hoover who, having missed the service one Sunday, asked his wife what the sermon was about. "Oh, it was about sin," she replied. "He was against it."

So here's another sermon against sin. But I believe that you will find it to be a practical recipe which gives you guidance for living as a true family in Christ. And who among us cannot use a refresher course in living as God would like us to live?

The first ingredient of this recipe is truth-telling: "Put away falsehood; speak the truth to our neighbors, for we are members of one another." This is best illustrated perhaps by an old Jewish story that tells of a man who comes to his rabbi with a question. *"Rabbi," he said, "I understand almost all of the law. I understand the commandments not to kill or steal. What I don't understand is why there is a commandment against slandering the neighbor." The rabbi said to him, "Before I answer this question, I have a task for you. Take a sack of feathers and place a single feather on the doorstep of each house in the village. Then return for your answer."*

The man did as he was told and soon returned to the rabbi, saying that the task was complete. "Now please answer me, rabbi. Why is it wrong to slander my neighbor?" "Ah, said the rabbi, "I want you to do one more thing. Go back and collect all the feathers before I give you the answer. "But Rabbi," the man protested, "the feathers will be impossible to collect. The wind will have blown them away." "So it is with the lies we tell about our neighbors," the rabbi said. "They can never be retrieved. They are like feathers in the wind." (From William R. White, Stories For the Journey).

Truth-telling: here we have an ingredient, and then comes the reason for the ingredient: "we are members of one another." If we lie or slander we hurt our own family; we hurt ourselves. We are one. We are to be honest with ourselves and each other. Honesty is the basis of good relationships. You may be thinking: I am honest, I don't need to hear this. Yet don't you find truth-telling to be a struggle in this world? Isn't it easy to fall into inappropriate discussions about other people, or to stretch the truth a little? Sometimes we need this simple reminder, don't we?

2nd ingredient: "Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and do not make room for the devil." A realistic command: yes, we all get angry, sometimes with good reason, often not. Anger that fights oppressions such as racism, sexism, and other injustices, is even necessary, and is very useful when channeled into constructive action. But anger cannot be allowed to get out of control and become all consuming, for if it does, it lets in not God, but the devil, a symbol of the reality of evil and death. Even anger at injustice can become destructive and counter-productive: for example, when it ends up in riots destroying the property eked into existence by the very victims of the injustice (as happened in Los Angeles several times). We must deal with our anger constructively and appropriately. We can also get help also from our family members and friends to deal with anger and find healthy solutions: and is there anyone of us that has not at one time or the other needed such help?

The 3rd ingredient concerns stealing. There must have been a fair number of thieves in the congregations that this letter was originally written for. We know about stealing, we think. We're not thieves. But there may still be room for us to learn from these verses. Why is stealing bad and working good? Because, says the text, we need to be able to give to the needy. So - do we need to examine what we do with the fruit of our work? Are we perhaps acting a little like thieves if we don't give to the needy some of the results of our labor? Are there ways in which our labor is stealing from others, or from the planet? These are verses worth pondering.

The 4th ingredient returns to activities of the mouth: "Let no evil talk come out of your mouth, but only what is useful for building up...." I love the King James translation here: "put away corrupt communication." What is corrupt communication? Talk that tears down rather than builds up; communication that impedes rather than facilitates the healthy growth and work of this group called "church." What should our talk do? "[May] your words give grace to those who hear." But, my friends, most of us have to admit that there have been times when we have allowed ourselves a nasty word instead of a good word. Even our humor can be cutting and negative. I know that most of us try hard not to speak ill of others. Yet

we are challenged today by these biblical words to build up every person that comes through our doors. We are challenged to bring grace to each member, each adult and each child. Let's do that! Let's become artists of grace! Let's ask God to help us to become great artists of grace to all the people who walk through the doors. Let's give words of grace to everyone we know!

The last set of ingredients for this recipe for living begins with the reason for it: we are not to grieve the Holy Spirit. How? By putting away: "bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice." Instead we need the ingredients of kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness, the kind of forgiveness that God has shown us. Kindness, compassion, forgiveness - they don't always come naturally do they? Have you watched children on a playground? Have you seen how, when they feel threatened or hurt, they react with anger and bitterness? Sometimes we are tempted to act just like these children, aren't we? Yet don't we all long to experience compassion, to know kindness, to receive forgiveness, to be a loving family! And I have experienced that love here – let's keep it up and give more of it to each other!

So we have it. A recipe for living. An old family recipe for acting like God's family and for being the dwelling place of God. This recipe can be summed up in the last verse: "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

An old, old goal of Christian spirituality: to live as imitators of God, *imitatio Dei*, in the Latin. Have we not struggled to figure out how to grow spiritually, modeling ourselves on Christ, to be imitators of God, God whose very nature is love? It is simple and it is not simple. On the one hand, you don't have to do anything - you are adopted and loved by God, out of God's love, not out of your actions. On the other hand, once you recognize your adoption and your new family, you are commanded act like Go—not by having God's power, but by showing God's love. Hard to do at times! But do not be discouraged.

God empowers us with the Holy Spirit with which we were sealed at baptism. God lifts us up, not with our strength, but with God's power. We have the power of the Holy Spirit, working in us and through the other members of this family, to guide us and strengthen us. We are a family – Christ's family; and we will go out today and show his love toward each other, and toward our neighbors, just as he commanded. We have the recipe! Amen.