

One day, a little girl asks her Mom, “Where did we come from?” The Mom answers, “Ages ago, God created Adam and Eve; they had children, and here we are today.” Later, the girl asks her Dad the same question. He answers, “Ages ago, there were apes; over time they became people, and here we are today.” Confused, the girl goes back to her Mom and says, “You said that *God* created us, but Dad said that we came from apes. I don’t see how you both can be right.” The mom says, “Oh, that’s easy to explain. I was talking about my side of the family; Dad was talking about his side.”

Sorry Dads! This probably isn’t the best joke to tell on Father’s Day. But it is, after all, a joke. To think there could be such a distinction between Mom’s side and Dad’s side – why, the very idea is absurd! And actually, this leads to the point I want to make about another family, God’s family, the Church. In this family, it doesn’t matter where we’ve come from. In this family, there are no “sides.” The very idea is absurd! Through Baptism, God made us His children and heirs. By grace, He clothed with the righteousness of Christ. He has made us “**one**” in every way that matters, so in this family there is no room for worldly distinctions. As Paul says in our text, “**All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**”

Now, all of us know this. Baptism makes us one in Christ. But what does this mean for congregational life? And just as important, what does it not mean? In an age when love is often confused with indulgence, and tolerance with moral indifference, it would be easy to twist this verse into something Paul never intended! In fact, some *do*. So before we go any further, let’s be clear: Paul did not say that once you’re baptized, you can live anyway you want, and everyone else must accept it for the sake of unity. Paul did not say there is no longer any distinction between faithful and unfaithful, moral and immoral, right and wrong.

Maybe in a dysfunctional family anything goes, but in God’s family the focus is on spiritual health and growth. More to the point, family members are supposed to *promote* each other’s spiritual health and growth – and worldly distinctions must not get in the way. Whatever our background, whatever our status, whatever our gender, we have this in common: all of us have been saved from sin, all of us have been saved for a new kind of life, and all of us are called to live this new life together and share it with others. It is a life modeled *on* Christ, lived *for* Christ, empowered *by* Christ, and the goal is for us to “**grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ.**” Notice: unity itself is not the goal – unity for the sake of unity. No, unity serves this greater goal. And as a matter of fact, we’re more likely to experience unity when we’re focused on this goal. How can we promote each other’s spiritual health? How can we help each other “**grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ**”? That is what we are supposed to focus on, so that is what I’d like to focus on today.

To start out, let's think Baptism. Imagine we've just adopted a new brother into our spiritual family through Baptism. Question: How are we now going to keep him healthy and help him grow? We know what not to do. We mustn't ignore this new brother and expect him to fend for himself. The poor guy could starve to death! We mustn't look down on him or talk down to him because he's not as big and strong as we are. That could scar him for life! So we know what not do! But as for what to do, that's a bigger question, and one way to get at it would be to ask: In *good* families, how do the members promote each other's health? In good families, how do the members help each other grow? Obviously, there are many ways possible, but here are three ways that are essential.

First of all, in good families the members watch out for each other. I know a little about this. I was the oldest of five, and if there was one thing that was drummed into me, it was to watch out for my younger brothers and sisters. Believe me, it wasn't always easy – especially as we got older! Many a time I was told: *"You're not the boss of me!"* – which, of course, was not the issue. *"This is none of your business!"* – which, of course, was a dead giveaway! Frankly, there were times my siblings were lucky I was watching out for them. They came that close to some real disasters! And later, there were times I was lucky they were watching out for me. Not that we always liked being watched out for or that we always did it just right, but we did need it, by and large we did benefit from it, and that's one way love operates in a good family. We don't ignore each other. We don't leave the others to fend for themselves. We watch out for each other.

As a church, we also need to watch out for each other. I know this really runs against the grain. In our society, if someone's messing up, that's their business. If someone's messing around, that's *really* their business. We may gossip behind their back, but to say something to their face, much less help them get back on the straight and narrow – man, that's just not done! We're more likely to think: *"I'm staying out of it. This is none of my business!"* But my friends, how is that showing love? To just let a person wander down the wrong path – away from God and His will? To just let a person go *"cruising for a bruising"* without even trying to reach out? How is that showing love? Oh, we can come up with some great excuses for them:

- *"Well, what do you expect? He's just a new Christian."*
- *"I suppose it had to happen eventually. You know, he came from a broken home."*
- *"We need to cut him some slack. After all, he is under so much pressure."*

Our excuses can sound so enlightened! But really, aren't we just making the same kind of distinctions Paul spoke against in our text? Think what he'd say if we used excuses like these:

- *"Well, what do you expect? He's just a gentile."*
- *"I suppose it had to happen eventually. You know, he grew up as a slave."*
- *"We need to cut him some slack. After all, he is just a man."*

Paul wouldn't call that loving or understanding. He would call it bigotry and nonsense. Likewise, the other biblical writers. In fact, the very last point James makes in his letter is this: **"Whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins."** Could Scripture be more clear? This isn't about judging. It's about caring, about loving, about watching out for each other. In good families, the members do that, and it's just as important in our spiritual family, the church. We need to watch out for each other.

We also need to assist each other. This is another thing we see in good families. Not just when push comes to shove. Not just when the need is overwhelming. As a basic part of everyday life, the members assist each other.

I could cite many examples from our own congregation, but not to embarrass anyone, let me brag a bit on my cousins in East Germany, Robert and Andreas Mittag. They're both in their 30's, grew up under Communism, and suffered a lot of disadvantages because of their Christian faith. But one of their family's strongest values was to always be there for each other. That got them through the hard times and it is just as important today. Both brothers own restaurants – unthinkable under the old system; still difficult under the new. But they assist each other. Every morning, they meet at the market and have breakfast. If one is dealing with an issue at work, they talk it through. If one is short-handed or over-booked, the other brother pitches in. And the thing is: this happens naturally. To them, it's what brothers do -- what *families* do. Their wives were raised differently. The old Communist system didn't exactly encourage family values, so for them there's been a learning curve. But the Mittags pull together, and the new Mittags are starting to get it, and the new, new Mittags (little Charly and Sophie) are being raised that way, too. It's a very strong value for them. In good families, the members assist each other.

Likewise in our spiritual family. We all know Paul's words from Galatians 6: **"Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ."** So how do we do that? We already know about practical things: bring over a casserole when someone is sick, offer transportation when someone needs a ride, chip in some money when someone is hard up; things like that. So let's go a little deeper and think about ministry – promoting spiritual health and growth. How do we assist each other with that?

Prayer probably comes to mind– and let us never underestimate its value. *"More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of!"*

Teaching probably comes to mind, too. And God bless our congregation's teachers and small group leaders for their commitment to sharing God's Word!

Maybe worship comes to mind – ushering, lecturing, music, sound board, altar care, helping with Communion.

Or maybe we think of committee work, service groups, visitation, Church Council; things like that.

There are a lot of ways to be helpful. And do you know what's especially helpful? When it's voluntary! When it happens naturally! When someone gets involved just because that's what Christians do! It's easy to say, *"I would have been willing to help. Why didn't you ask?"* What's better is: *"Here's what I'm able to do. Where can the church use me?"* And sometimes what's best of all is to just show up, just pitch in, and if you see a specific need, *volunteer* to meet it. That's how we got our e-mail prayer chain. That's how we started recycling. That's how our shut-ins got visited last Christmas. People saw a need and volunteered to meet it. What a difference that made! What a difference it makes! Always! So this, too, should be a strong value for our spiritual family, the church: we need to assist each other.

Then, last but not least, we need to encourage each other. This being Father's Day, let me tell a story about my Dad. He is not very musical. When it comes to singing, he has a tin ear. But there is one song he can sing perfectly in tune – *"Oh Come, Oh Come Emmanuel."* Here's why. Back when Dad was in his early 30's, some guys from the church decided to form a men's choir for Christmas, and they recruited him, too. *"I can't carry a tune,"* he protested. But they wouldn't let him off the hook. *"You can learn,"* they told him, *"We'll help you."* And they did. As they practiced, one guy sang on his left side, one guy sang on his right side, and one with a rumbling bass sang behind him. At first, it didn't work. They kept on encouraging him. Little by little, he got better. They kept on encouraging him. And by the time Christmas rolled around, my Dad had the song down pat. He still does. Just that one song, but he's got it down pat – thanks to the encouragement of his friends!

And that's such a precious gift, isn't it? Encouragement. It can make such a difference! And the more encouragement we offer, the better – especially in our spiritual family, the church! I know how much it encouraged me when you all put together that great book of letters last winter. I can't help but think what a difference it could make if we offered the same encouragement to each other!

Especially right now. You know, we've been through the wringer this past year! Emotionally, financially – through the wringer! So this would be a great time for some who've been around for a while to offer some words of encouragement: *"God has brought us through a lot worse than this! He is faithful! We're going to be just fine!"* It would be a good time for some new members to chime in, too: *"We love this church! We love what it stands for! That is why we're here!"* This would also be a good time for our youth to speak up: *"We're proud of our church! It's offered us such opportunities! And we can't wait to see what great things God's going to do next!"* Encouragement! It can make such a difference! And the more we offer, the better! So this, too, is an important value for us to practice in our spiritual family, the church: we need to encourage each other.

Put this way, it's easy to see why God has made us **"one."** He wants everyone to know Him, receive His salvation, experience new life, and **"grow up into the fullness of the stature of Christ"**? So how will that happen? Not by us going it alone! This mission requires all of us, and it is too important to let any worldly distinction divide us. To paraphrase Paul, don't think in terms of "old members" or "new members." We all need to watch out for each other. Don't think in terms of "retired members" or "youth." We all need to assist each other. Don't think in terms of "traditional" or "contemporary" – or any other labels. We all need to encourage each other. In a good family, that's how it works. In our spiritual family, that's how it needs to work. That is why we are **"one."** Amen.