

Proper 21A (Pentecost 17), 2009

Text: Mark 9:38-50

Title: "A Common Faith"

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Families define us. They make us who we are. They give us people to care for and people to care for us.

You were born as someone's son or daughter. God gave you a place within a family. He didn't create you as an isolated individual, but a member of a family.

When God became man, He was born into a family. He had a mom and a dad, brothers and sisters, aunts, uncles and cousins.

Families are important to us. Our mission statement here at Faith is, "Reaching out to build Christ-centered families of faith."

Having a family of faith means having Christ at the center. He's the one who holds everyone together. It's not about having a picture-perfect family where everyone gets along and everyone behaves and no one ever fights. Families of faith are real families who have their questions and doubts and fears. But through it all, families of faith have Christ at their center and look to Him for all things.

Mothers of faith pray and beg and plead to Christ for their families. Fathers of faith look to Christ to strengthen their faith. Children of faith receive everything they need from Christ, and in turn care for the other children in the family.

Today we see how big our family really is. And it's a big family. We have more brothers and sisters in Christ than we could ever imagine. We have family members across the country and across the world.

It's truly a joy to meet fellow Christians, and to be reminded of our unity in the faith. Whether it's talking with other Christians here in our community or on the other side of the world, there's comfort in knowing that we're not alone. God has made us part of a big family.

I have memories of singing and praying with fellow Christians in many different places, from devotions with migrant Mexican workers in the strawberry fields of central Florida, to the divine service in a 13th century cathedral in Tallinn, Estonia, to a hymn sing with Aboriginal Christians in the red dirt of central Australia. When I was in the Wind Symphony in college, we traveled across the country staying in homes of fellow Christians and enjoying the fellowship we have in Christ.

God's family has spread throughout the globe. Many of our family members look and sound very different than we do. But what we have in common is greater than that which divides us- and that's the name of Jesus.

Now the disciples thought they were the only ones in the family. And so when they saw other people doing the things that they did, they were quick to forbid them. John seems proud that they gave up those who were casting out demons. He expects Jesus to pat them on the back and congratulate them for stopping these pretenders, these phony disciples. Instead, it is the disciples who receive Jesus' rebuke. He tells them to leave the other folks alone and not to interfere in their work. Those who cast out demons in Jesus' name aren't going to turn around and persecute Him.

There are many people in this world who are against us. Just as in Jesus' day, people are offended and actively work to stop Jesus. With so many who are against us, we don't need to make new enemies within our own family.

So if it's doing something big- like spectacular miracles, or something small- like giving out a glass of water, if it's done in Jesus' name, it's a good thing. There are many other Christians out there doing good things, and it's not our place to stop them or criticize them when they are doing good works in Jesus' name.

So how do we interact with the rest of our family? It's big family. How do we live and work together with other Christians, especially those who are Baptists, or Methodist, or Roman Catholic, or whatever else?

There are two extremes we need to avoid. First is the notion that only Missouri Synod Lutherans are members of God's family. The church is bigger than we are, and true Christians are to be found in many different denominations.

If you take this approach, thinking that no one outside of our church will be saved, Jesus' words are for you. "Whoever is not against us is for us." There are many who are baptized, who bear Jesus' name, who are not LCMS Lutherans, and we need to remind ourselves of this from time to time.

But there's another extreme, one that's more prevalent among us and equally as dangerous. This is the opposite view, that it doesn't really matter what you believe or what you teach as long as you believe in Jesus. It doesn't matter if you baptize infants or wait until they make a decision, it doesn't matter if you think the bread and wine are really the body and blood of Christ or not, it doesn't matter if you think that there will be rapture or not- all these things are minor, unimportant details. The only thing that matters is that you believe in Jesus.

If this is you, then Jesus' words are for you, "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to stumble, it would be better if a millstone were tied around his neck and cast into the sea."

Causing others to stumble, to doubt God's word is not some minor detail. Those who teach that baptism doesn't save children, causes them to stumble. Those who teach that the body and blood of Christ are not present in the Lord's Supper, cause others to stumble. Any time someone teaches that Jesus' words don't matter, that causes people to stumble. It's a big deal.

Family life is not perfect. We fight and argue with other members of our families. Sometimes we fight and argue about small things, petty things, insignificant things. For these fights, we need to repent.

But there is a time to stand our ground. When people in your family do things that are harmful to themselves or to the faith of other, out of love, we need to work with them solve these problems.

Think of a time when someone in your family, maybe even your son or daughter, did something that you knew was harmful and destructive to themselves. You may have been tempted to say nothing, to just avoid the situation and get along. But that's not what is best for your family. They needed to hear that they were making a mistake and they needed to change their life for their own good. Maybe they listened to you. Maybe they didn't. You were still family, but you just couldn't approve their choices and the way they were living their life. It's hard to do, especially when you're close to someone. But often, for their own good, they need to make some changes.

We have a similar situation within the family of Christ. We have sisters and brothers who are saying and doing things that are harmful to their faith, causing them to trust in something other than Christ, putting something other than Christ in the center of their family. We need to address the situation- not in a mean and spiteful way, but in a kind and loving way, the same way that we would talk to members of our own human families.

Where this becomes most difficult is at the Lord's Table. It is truly a tragic situation that when we gather together to eat the family meal, the Lord's Supper, and we are not able to eat together. One question that is asked all the time is, "Why can't all Christians commune together?" It doesn't feel right to exclude members of our own family from the Lord's Table.

But there is a reason for this. We are not being like the disciples and cutting ourselves off from those aren't like us. We're not saying that our fellow Christians are not part of God's family. We're not doing it to be mean. We are acting out of love.

The Lord's Supper is no ordinary meal. At this table you receive the body and blood of God Himself. This is a tremendous blessing, but it can also be very harmful. The body and blood of Christ can harm you. It's hard to believe, but it's true. In the congregation at Corinth, there were people who were treating the Lord's Supper like an ordinary meal, and not the body and blood of Christ. As a result some had become sick, and some had even died.

The Lord's Supper is powerful medicine. Taken properly, according to the Lord's instructions, it provides healing of body and soul. Taking improperly, as though it was ordinary bread and wine, it can bring sickness and even death.

Imagine you see a younger member of your family, a son or daughter, grandson or granddaughter rummaging through the medicine cabinet. They manage to get a bottle open and are about to take some strange pills. Wouldn't you stop them, and keep them from harming themselves?

We don't give the body and blood of Christ to children who do not know what they are receiving. We don't want to harm them. So we instruct them and prepare them so that they receive this gift for their blessing and not for their harm. In the same way, we don't give the body and blood of Christ to those who do not confess the body and blood of Christ, even if they are fellow Christians and members of God's family. We instruct them and prepare them so that they receive this gift for their blessing and not their harm.

It's not a good situation. And it's hard when you aren't able to commune with your brothers and sisters in Christ, particularly when they're members of our human families. It's not how Jesus meant things to be. But out of love for the other members of our family we don't give them something that could harm them.

It's not easy to live together in a family. In Christ we have a really big family. There's much that unites us within the church. But unfortunately there are still differences that divide us.

In our gospel lesson, Jesus warns us against two extremes- on the one hand actively interfering with the work of other Christians, on the other hand turning a blind eye to false teaching. We aren't to act as though we're the only members of Christ's family, but we shouldn't let our family members cause others to stumble.

It's difficult, and we often make mistakes in how we treat our brothers and sisters in Christ.

The gospel lesson today reminds us that it's the Lord's church. It's His family. It's a big family, and that's a good thing. God has given us brothers and sisters here in this place, and across the whole world. God is the one who keeps His church together, who unites us in the one Faith, one baptism, one body of Christ. We confess our common faith in the Apostles' Creed...