

## “Why Church? For the Family”

Reading: *Isaiah 25:6-9; Hebrews 11:1, 32-12:3*

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One of the ways the Psalmist describes God is as a “father to the fatherless” and a “defender of widows.” In Deuteronomy, right after God is called “God of Gods and Lord of Lords, the great God, mighty and awesome,” He is further described as one who “defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow.” And that’s certainly an accurate description, if you skim through the rest of the Bible. Again and again, God commands His people to care for orphans and widows and immigrants, and when those people are not taken care of, God does indeed defend their cause and punish their oppressors.

This is not just welfare or doing good turns to those less fortunate. God does not take up the cause of the orphan and widow just because it’s the right thing to do. He doesn’t just drop a few coins in the cup and then go on with His day. No, He is a *father* to the fatherless, and He *defends* the widow. His method is adoption; He looks for those who have lost their security and stability, and He brings them into His family. The one without a parent becomes *His* child, and the one without a spouse becomes *His* to defend. Our God is in the business of family. That does not mean, as some take it to mean, that His main concern is the so-called “traditional” family of a husband, wife, and 2.3 children living in a ranch-style suburban home with a white picket fence, a “traditional” family that bears little resemblance to the families in the Bible. No, it means that He is concerned with bringing the unconnected, the rootless, the wandering, whether you’re a runaway, abandoned, or bereaved, into the embrace of His family.

In my opinion, one of the single most compelling reasons to be a part of the church is because of the community it creates. The church certainly should be a supportive community for people, but it’s much more than just a support group or a gathering of like-minded people. Being a part of the family of God means that God is the one who binds us together. We do not need anything in common apart from claiming God as our Father in order to be brothers and sisters together. If you are in Christ, you have brothers and sisters across the world and through the ages, people from completely different backgrounds, cultures, languages, experiences, socioeconomic classes, climates, and ways of thinking — and yet they are your family, because they are children of the same Father.

This is one of the greatest reasons “why church,” as we’ve been exploring during these last several weeks: because the church represents the family of God, and there is nothing else in the world that can offer the same depth of hope and communion and unity. Not even appealing to some vague notion of “common humanity” could give hope to all peoples, because the meaning of humanity varies wildly across space and time; there’s very little in common across all of humanity. No, it is only in this family, this *redeemed* humanity, in which humanity is finally given its full meaning, and the commonality is found in God. It is a family to which all people are called, and all who respond are given a seat at the table.

Our Scripture for today comes from the epic chapter 11 of Hebrews, a famous chapter which unfortunately there just isn’t time to read in full. It’s a chapter that re-tells in miniature the greatest hits of the whole of salvation history. Almost all of the greatest heroes from our favorite Bible stories are mentioned here. The point is that, first of all, these were people who had hope in what God

would do, and they trusted God's promises even when it didn't look like the fulfillment of those promises was anywhere to be found, and in many cases they even died remaining faithful to God while they still waited. They are "heroes of the faith," people who stand as examples to all generations of how to trust God's promises in spite of appearances. Some of them trusted God's promise of a child, even though it seemed absurd. Some of them trusted God for protection when it seemed like God's enemies were unstoppable. Some of them trusted God's instructions, even when those instructions made little sense.

The point of the whole chapter is that to those who are in the family, God gives promises, and He includes them in the inheritance of His family, and He is faithful to those promises even in the face of death. These people are not just heroes of the faith or characters in our favorite Bible stories, they are our brothers and sisters, family members who show us what life looks like in God's family. Of course all those examples lead us to Jesus as the supreme example, the one who shows us above all others what it means to have faith in God our Father. He is the "pioneer and perfecter of faith;" He is the source of the hope of previous generations and the one who fulfills that hope. He's the one they were waiting for, and He's the one whose trust in His Father is the definitive example to us for how this family works. "For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."

Today we celebrate All Saints' Day, when we remember those in our family who have gone before us and remained faithful to the end, proving their claim that God's might is stronger than the jaws of death. We are reminded that we are part of a huge family, an ancient family, and God has been at work embracing new family members and fulfilling His promises to them for a long, long time. We are reassured that our hope is not in vain, that there have been many who have gone before us, have suffered before us, have doubted before us, have struggled before us, have fallen and been forgiven before us, and have persevered and seen God's faithfulness before us. Some of them we know personally, and we have loved them, and we miss them dearly. Some of them we know only by name and story, and many of them we will never know until God's kingdom comes in its fullness.

So today we remember them, the recent dead and the long-dead, knowing that they made mistakes and weren't perfect, but as they came to Christ they were made new by His grace, and not even death's cold grip can keep them away from God's welcome. They are to us not objects of worship, but many of them certainly are recipients of our love, and they have been for us miracles of God's grace and signposts pointing to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ. So it is right to mourn them, because we are separated from those we love, but we do not mourn as those without hope. We remember our family, and we are family to one another in times of mourning, and we look to Jesus Christ, the one who became our brother to demonstrate the faithfulness of our Father. We celebrate the Lord's Supper together today, our family meal, as a continued proclamation to one another and the world that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again: this is a proclamation of the faithfulness of Jesus, and an expectation of His faithfulness to us through eternity.



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