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Adriana Sybenga

Your Were Formed For God's Family Romans 12: 1-16

What picture does the word family bring to your mind – a mom and a dad, with one or more children - a place to live, where people come to after a long day at the office, or at school – a place where you can be yourself – a place where you can relax – a place to do your laundry – to eat and to sleep.

Do you define family as a place where you feel loved, and accepted for just you – a place where you learned right from wrong; social skills and how to get on with other people? Sounds rather ideal, doesn't it? Yet, despite all the bad press families get on the news and on T.V. shows, I still like to believe that these kinds of families still exist. But I also know that at my workplace I hear lots of stories about family life, which is much different. And you know these stories as well – lack of commitment, inability to provide for life's basic needs, lack of respect for each other, abuse of various kinds – all things which lead to the breakdown of family life.

One of my first clients at work was a man who had been divorced twice. He had a son, whom he had not talked to for over seven years. This man virtually lived alone the last years of his life – first in his car, and then in the nursing home. When he was admitted to the hospital, the staff assumed that I was a relative – for I was the only one who came to visit him regularly. And when he died this past Tuesday, the doctor called me, for there was no one else to call.

When I first met with this man, I had a hard time being nice to him. His manner was rough, he was way over weight, his clothes were ill-fitting, and because he lived in his car, he had no access to a shower. He often made racist remarks, and had stereotyped most everyone. I remember complaining to my son, Dan – telling him that this man was perhaps more than what I could deal with. I remember what Dan said to me after a moment of silence. He said: "Mom, maybe you should try picturing Jesus in his face." I replied, almost flippantly: "I don't know that I can do that." Yet, by God's grace, and literally picturing Jesus when I talked – or rather listened to this man, I began to see a softer side to him. And when I learned of his dying this past Tuesday morning, I realized how much I had learned to love this crusty old man. I realized that he had become like family.

As Christians, we believe that we belong to the family of God – yet, sometimes I wonder what that means for us. What does it mean to be part of God's family? Does being part of the family of God mean - that you need to be part of a church? Rick Warren answers this question with a resounding yes! He describes the church being God's family. Often we think of church as a building or an institution; or some organization or social club. A lot of people say: "Well, I am going to church" as if church is a place you go. But Warren doesn't agree with that. Warren believes, and I agree with him that church is not a place you go to – rather church is a family you belong to.

And how would you picture the church family - a group of like-minded people, sharing the same cultural background, subscribing to one form of worship and meeting together only on Sunday mornings? Acts 2 verse 42 describes the church family as believers devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, people who devote themselves to

the fellowship, eating together and praying together. They shared their possessions, and sold what they needed in order to provide for the needy among them. Now that seems ideal – doesn't it - people devoting themselves to each other – applying themselves with energy and time for the benefit of each other. And according to this same chapter, Acts 2 verse 46, they did this every day of the week. Every day they had fellowship with each other. Sounds almost unbelievable!

Yet, that is the goal that we as Christians are called to. And for Rick Warren, that is the second purpose for our lives as believers. Fleshing out what Jesus said was the greatest command – to love God and your neighbor as yourself – Warren makes loving God, getting to know God and having a relationship with him our first purpose – which is what Pastor Randy talked about last week. And Warren's second purpose of the Christian life is being formed for God's family – the church. We are to love the people in our church family. And we all know that in order to truly love people, we need to spend time with them, we need to get to know them, to show a real interest in their lives – not just the hello, how are you doing today, kind of thing. We need to invest in them.

To be a part of the church family, you need to choose to belong. The Christian life is not just a matter of believing. Sometimes we think that that is the most important thing – to believe all the right doctrines. But scripture tells us that we need to belong – we need to choose to belong. When we were born, we automatically became part of a family. Yet to belong to God's family, we have to make a decision to join.

Sometimes we hear people say, “Well, I am a Christian, but I don't want to belong to any church.” Well, that doesn't make sense. **THE CHURCH IS WHERE YOU LIVE OUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHRISTIAN.** Saying that you don't need to belong to a church is like saying, “I'm a football player, but I don't want to be part of any team; or a tuba player saying that they don't want to be part of an orchestra. We all know that a football player needs other players for a game to happen, and a tuba on it's own sounds pretty odd.

In our scripture reading, Paul reminds us in verse 5 that we as believers in Christ form one body. Just like our foot is a member of the body, so we are members of Christ's body. Paul also tells us that as members of the body, we need each other. Just like the foot needs to be attached to the leg, and the leg attached to the body: it all kind of all works together. Our foot would shrivel up and die if it was not attached to our body. As a Christian we need to attach ourselves to a group of believers. It is important to belong to a church family.

And just as how in our families, we learn to share, so we need to share with members of the family of God. We need to learn to share our time - and sharing our time with others means developing friendships, making friends. Sometimes we know people who have really deep, long term friendships for many years, and we think – how lucky they are. Well, the truth is, friendship is not a matter of luck. It simply takes time and commitment. I know, I know our lives are busy, we have full schedules, and when we are done our work, we are tired. But you know, I have spent time with a number of people as they were dying. Often they talk about regrets. But you know, not one of them, not a single person, ever said that they wished they had put more time in at the job, or made more money, or even watched more television. It's always the same: they tell me: “I wish I had spent more time with family, with friends.” As people we need relationships and we need to make time to work on them.

One way of building relationships with others is by sharing our experiences, our concerns and our joys. I know that that is not always an easy thing to do. I remember when I first was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn't want to share that news with anyone other than my immediate family. Yet later I realized what a blessing it was that I had shared this with other people. At the time of my surgery, not only were our kids and Sid praying for me, but people in both Canada and the United States.

I know that lots of times, we have things we find hard to share with others, but you know, you don't always need to tell everyone – but it does help to tell some others -even if it is only one other person– so then you do not have to carry the burden all by yourself.

And it probably does not come as a surprise that sharing our experience, our concerns and our joys, is easier done in our homes. Sharing our experiences is best done in small groups: with people we have learned to know and to trust. Knowing people also makes it easier to pray for one another and to encourage one another.

There is however, something we need to watch out for. When someone is sharing a problem – we generally want to jump in and fix it; we offer solutions, we have answers for everything. But often what is needed is a listening ear – someone who sympathizes, someone who promises to pray for the situation in their personal devotions. And I think it is important that we learn to pray together – even just as friends.

And in our small groups, we can begin to learn to encourage each other. Often when people do have problems, all they really need is encouragement to keep on going; to keep on working at solving their stuff. To give someone confidence, to give someone hope is like getting a new lease on life. Encouragement can make all the difference.

Another part of building relationships is doing our part. Again, just like in our families, there are responsibilities, there are different chores which need doing. Meals need to be made, laundry is to be done, the house needs to be cleaned – all kinds of things need to be taken care of. And so it is in the church family. God doesn't want you in his church family to simply sit and soak in some spiritual spa. God brought you into his family to serve. Sometimes we think that serving is just for a few people in the church. But that is not true. We all have a part to play. God has gifted each of us. Perhaps you have the gift of teaching: maybe you could volunteer to help out in children's worship. Or perhaps your gift is hospitality: there are a number of people who would love to have a dinner invitation, or there are the elderly who cannot get out as much, they would love to have a visit to break their day. God wants to make a difference in people's lives USING YOU. Some time ago, some one asked me how we experience God's presence in our lives. I believe that one of the ways we feel God's presence, is through other people and how we experience their love.

Building relationships, treating and loving believers like family, not only takes time – it also takes commitment. It takes commitment to accept others in the good times as well as the bad. It takes commitment to accept the weakness of others; to work with imperfect people. Committing ourselves to each other takes sacrifice – it takes the same kind of love Jesus has for you. He died for you, even though you are weak, even though you are imperfect. God was so committed to us, his family, that he sacrificed his own son, so that we might receive forgiveness for our sin through him.

Choosing to belong to the family of God is not always easy. Sharing one's experiences; sharing one's home is not always easy. And taking time to build relationships is not always easy. In fact, often it takes work, and sometimes even hard

work. Sometimes the only time we can do some of these things is by remembering Jesus, remembering how he took the time for us. Or perhaps, we need to picture his face, when we are asked to do something, which really takes us out of our comfort zone.

Remember my friend, who died this past week. Well, through God's grace, and only God's grace, I was able to track down his son. I spent a number of hours listening to him. The son told me of all the hurts and frustration which had led to their final argument and estrangement. I sympathized with the son. I told him that I felt bad for the situation. I believe that because I gave him the freedom to talk without judging him or the situation, the son began to tell me even more. And then at one point, the son began telling me how badly HE felt about the situation. He began to wonder how he could help me with his dad's memorial service and the things related to his dad's dying. At the memorial service, the son spoke, not only of the hurts he had experienced, but also the good things, which he and his dad had shared. He concluded by telling us that in the end, he realized that he still loved his dad.

And that is what life is all about – love. That is what so many people are longing for, looking for – and we find it in God. In God we find a love, which will never disappoint. Trust me, the greatest privilege you will ever be offered in life is the privilege of being a part of God's family – of being part of God's church.

God has also gifted us with resources – and as God shares them with us – so now we have opportunity to give back to God. We give our gifts of money this morning for

Dear God in Heaven: thank you for your love to us, for how you accept us even though we are weak, even though we are imperfect. Thank you for showing us how to love. Thank you for your church – your family, and thank you for accepting us into your

family. Thank you for how you provide for us as your children. O God, help us to love one other – to see each other as your image bearers. Bless our gifts as we try to share with one another. We pray this in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus.

The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make his face shine upon you
and be gracious to you
the Lord turn his face toward you
and give you peace!