

## All in the Family

**1 JOHN 3:1-7 (NRSV) *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are. The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. <sup>3</sup>And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. <sup>4</sup>Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. <sup>5</sup>You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. <sup>6</sup>No one who abides in him sins; no one who sins has either seen him or known him. <sup>7</sup>Little children, let no one deceive you. Everyone who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous.***

In almost 55 years of preaching, the most difficult sermons for me to prepare and deliver, year after year, have been Mother's Day sermons. What do I say of significance that hasn't been said over and over, year after year?

And how do I honor motherhood without lifting up one single model as the only way to be a good mother; and how do I honor mothers without patronizing them or becoming "schmaltzy?" (If you like the schmaltz, you're in luck because there's plenty of it out there!)

Most of all, how do I address Mother's Day in a way that maintains integrity with Scripture, and helps us grow more like Jesus in our relationships—as mothers and with our mothers? How do I do that when the Scriptures themselves are so sparing in credible resources—when the stories and passages cast women in general, and mothers in particular in subservient, inferior roles? Reading the Scriptures in any way that suggests that's God's will is reading the Scriptures wrong.

As I wrestled with the text for this morning, I kept remembering a line from Alex Haley's *Roots*.

Gambian teenager, Kunta Kinte is captured and sold into slavery in North Carolina. He marries Belle Waller, and they have a daughter, Kizzy.

When Kizzy is sixteen, she is sold to another plantation, and her new master, Tom Moore, rapes her repeatedly, until she bears a son, who Moore names, *George*.

*George* is a natural entertainer—a clown—a showman; and by his early teen years he's spending a lot of time up at the "Big House," entertaining the Moores and their guests.

*George* is apprenticed to the chicken pens, where he learns how to train fighting roosters. He is very good at it, and soon is touring with Moore, establishing a reputation, not only as a skilled trainer of the roosters, but also as quite a ladies' man. He becomes known as "Chicken *George*", and cuts quite a handsome figure in his trademark derby hat and green scarf.

But Kizzy is concerned. They're slaves. They've been rooted from their homelands, and plopped down in a strange land with no connections, no family, no identity except in Kunta Kinte's memory of his Mandinka village—in the stories he passed on to Kizzy, and she passed on to George.

But George has no interest. He's enjoying the "good life." One night Kizzy's fretting about George—sharing her concern with her fiancé—and she says, "He ain't got no sense of where he's been; so he ain't got no sense of where he's goin'."

In the children's book *The Little Prince*, the prince meets a flower on a foreign planet, and he asks where all the people are. The flower tells him "One never knows where to find them. The wind blows them away. They have no roots, and that makes their life very difficult."

Roots are something that tether you to the world. It may be your sense of home or neighborhood, connections to community, family, or your work. It's the things that ground you in your own sense of identity: creative projects or interests, friends and loved ones who accept you for who you are. Colette Phaire writes, Roots are "the essential, fundamental, or primary part or nature of something," the "origin or derivation, especially as a source of growth, vitality, or existence."<sup>1</sup>

Connections. Family. And therein lies my link to Mothers' Day. Family is more than genetics. One of our granddaughters came with the marriage, and our son adopted her. And, while there are no shared genes, there's never been a question whether she is part of the family. There is no hierarchy of love in family.

Family is more than blood. It's the common memories; a shared heritage to which we can connect, sometimes with pride, sometimes with embarrassment. On my mother's side of the family a great uncle was hung in Quanah, Texas—accused of stealing a horse. I don't know if he was guilty. I don't know, for sure, if it's even true. But it made for good story-telling at family reunions.

And that's what family's about: connections; shared stories and memories, the influence of grandparents, aunts, uncles, the relationships with cousins... the ways the different tributaries converge and flow together as one river.

Being a mother is challenging under the best circumstances. Being a mother in isolation—apart from family structure—multiplies the challenge. The sharing of important moments, the building of memories—the connections—are so important.

A great contradiction of our time is the simultaneous longing for connectedness and the obsession with privacy. Frequently, the result is isolation. And with our culture being so transient and our sources of self-definition so shallow (our profiles, our clothes, our music), sometimes we need something to connect us: to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pachamama.org/blog/getting-back-to-your-roots>

get us back on track: to know where we've been, so we can know where we're going."

Family. We have several extended families in our church: two; three generations. But in our culture, that's not the normal pattern. We're a mobile society, with generations—and even siblings within the same generation—living in different parts of the country. That can be very isolating if there's not some kind of connection. Social media has reconnected a lot of people; but, there's just a qualitative difference when you can look into another person's eyes, or reach out and touch.

In my doctoral project, I addressed that isolation by creating connections within the church. We called them surrogate families: grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, and we created ways for them to connect. It made a difference.

Our text this morning reminds us that as Christians we share a common ancestry—a common set of stories: we are children of God. The text even suggests a family resemblance— *when he is revealed, we will be like him*.

What are the stories that hold us together? Where have we been as a church family? Where are we headed? What are the accepted roles that are played by the various members and generations of the family—or, do we just have elected officers with specific jobs to do, and have great difficulty recruiting people to serve in those jobs—no sense of where we've been?

Can the church be family? Maybe it can, if we begin again to share the stories of faith that are rooted and grounded in Jesus—the stories that connect us to him and to each other; the stories that give us a sense of where we've been and who we are: *Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him*.

Until we see him face-to-face, maybe the stories about him will keep us connected. And, hopefully, thus connected, we will be a source of strength for those who accept the challenges and the blessings of motherhood.