

# Sermon Text for July 21, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## *Genesis 45:4-9, Matthew 12:46-50* *“We are family”*

You know I think if you put your hand to the wall you can still feel the energy and the excitement and the enthusiasm that was a part of every evening last week. VBS has come and gone and this year, more than any other year that I can remember, it was a huge success. We had more kids than I can remember, our volunteers were amazing and poured themselves out sacrificially and were exhausted but continued to work for Jesus so that his love would be realized through what they did. The amount of work and time and energy that goes into VBS is staggering if you add up all the people and all the hours that you all put into it, so thank you!

I want you to think for a second about the outreach opportunity that VBS provides us, the exposure and the points of contact with people who maybe don't have a place that they can call a church home or a church family. We had close to 90 children who registered, we had over 20 youth volunteers who are connected to our youth group but don't necessarily go to church here or anywhere. That is over 100 people, so I'll be conservative and say at least 50 families that may or may not have a church home and they are choosing to send their children to us to care for them and teach them about Jesus and they are okay about it.

We have to take advantage of this opportunity and not just let it pass by as if this is normal. This is not normal and we have to take advantage of these relationships that we now have and that we have built over time to introduce them to a family that wants to live life together, serve Jesus together, and teach other children and adults about the love of Christ. The reason why I think this is the most wonderful time of the year is not just because I get to be a kid again, which I do get to do, but because families pour into this church for a whole week who have no relationship with any church and probably have no relationship with Jesus himself either. It is as if God says here, let me bring you dozens of families who do not know me, it is now up to you to introduce them to me. We have to take advantage of the opportunities the Lord provides to us.

But we use this term family so often around here, I'm the biggest culprit of that. I love to use the word family to define who we are. What is it that makes us a family? Is it life experiences that we have shared together as we have prayed for each other, seen God at work as we implement programs, as we grow as a church, as we see our campus reshaped and growing as well? Is this what defines a family shared intense experiences that we have had together? Or are

we a family because we believe many of the same things about God, and about how we ought to live our lives, you know the whole Matthew 25 that we are rallying around feeding the hungry and clothing the naked and providing housing for the homeless, all those things that Jesus tells us we ought to do, we agree on that, and we agree on who Jesus is, so we think alike, we believe in the same thing, is that what defines a family?

Or maybe as we know in Lancaster County everyone is related to each other if you look at your family line, so maybe as a church what makes us a family is that we are biologically related, our blood lines makes us a family. Well, that can't be it because many of us weren't born and raised around here.

Today, in both of our Scriptures, this term family is redefined and Jesus tells us it is no longer biology or correct thinking but rather our actions which define to whom we belong and who composes our family. Let's read.

**READ            Show slides of family – brothers, parents, daughters, wife etc.**

Is there anyone or anything more important to us than family? We bristle at the thought of making them anything less than the most important thing in our life, and yet Scripture is full of very confusing verses that address our biological family in a way that seems to tell us that it is very possible to make our family an idol, that which is the most important thing in our life, even more important than our relationship and our devotion to God. If we put anything before God then it becomes an idol, even our family. I struggle with that thought because I can't think of when my devotion to my family would in any way impede my faithfulness to God, but there are warnings in Scripture about that so we do have to tread carefully.

Today we see our habitual interpretation of family redefined, and that isn't easy. Let's start with Joseph and his brothers. Joseph had a rough childhood if you remember. He was the favored son, his dad liked him more than any of his sons and he wasn't shy to show it. Joseph liked being the favorite one didn't hesitate to take every chance he got to remind them of his favored status. Big brothers don't like to be told that they are not the favorite, I think, I don't know, as the youngest son I was the favorite so I don't know what it is like to not be the favorite or the oldest brother.

So his brothers take him and bind him and sell him into slavery and he lived his childhood and teen years and young adult years as a slave until he gets discovered by Pharaoh and put in charge of all of Egypt, basically. His brothers think he is dead and when they come to Egypt for help and he sees them they don't recognize him but he, of course, recognized them, and our Scripture is when he introduces himself to them. He starts by saying: I am your brother.

You betrayed me, but it really wasn't your fault because God took that opportunity to save our family because I am orchestrating through God's help the greatest food preservation you have ever seen to save us from famine.

So, family, you betrayed me and you did things that were not very brotherly, but God found a way to make it work to his kingdom's goals. Joseph reminds his brothers that family may betray one another, but the love of God and the trust in God is always more important and has a greater impact on our future and the future of those around us than love of family. Isn't that the truth? For some of you any sermon on family can be extremely painful. You may have grown up in a childhood similar to Joseph where you were betrayed again and again. It may confuse you to use this term family for the church because the example that you have of a family is not ideal and in fact is incredibly painful.

What Joseph does here in Genesis is redefine who our family is from our biological ties to the ties that we receive in creation when God shapes us and forms us and breathes life into us and looks into our eyes and says: you are very good. You maybe never had a father or a mother who looked at you and said that you are very good. I can tell you today unequivocally that you do have Father who created you and thinks you are very good and loves you more than you can imagine. Our family is created when God creates us from the mud, not when our mother and father conceived us. This is so important for us to understand.

Jesus, in fact, takes it one step further. Let's turn to Matthew. Let's talk for a second about Jesus' family. Now, we don't know much about Jesus' childhood. We know a bit about his mom and dad while they were expecting and when he was born. We know one single story about his childhood when his mom and dad lose him for three days and don't realize until those days have passed and then they go and look for him. Don't judge, we've all lost a kid for a hot second or two. I know, three days does seem a bit extreme, but the point is that we don't know much about Jesus' family.

We know that he had a mother whose name was Mary, a father whose name was Joseph, but wasn't his biological father. We know from Matthew 13:55-56 that he had brothers and sisters and some of them are named. We know that at some point in his life in Mark 3:21 that they have a mental health intervention for him because they were told that he had lost his mind. So Jesus' family, his biological family, is a bit nebulous, but still we have some idea of what it is like. We know that as the oldest child they experienced some trauma as immigrants that they had to cross over the river to get into another country, Egypt, and they were able to do that.

But in this Scripture Jesus completely redefines this term family as we know it. Every single verse in our reading contained the words mother and brothers, and the last verse contains mother, brother, and sisters. So we know that these verses clearly address family and the world's understanding of family and Jesus' understanding of family.

His redefinition of family where it is no longer the biology that defines family happens when he points to his disciples and tells everyone present that with him a new spiritual family is created. The definition of family for Jesus is not built around biology, it is not even built around the correct theology or the correct belief, but rather it is redefined by those who are involved in the ethics and the actions that Jesus promotes. Those who do the will of the Father. What is this Gospel called? It is called the Gospel of Righteousness. How have we defined righteousness? Righteousness is acting according to the will of God. We are part of God's family when we act according to the will of God. This is important. It isn't loving Jesus that makes us part of the family, anyone can love Jesus. It is putting into action Jesus' words and commandments, and that, dear family, changes everything. By his words and actions Jesus redefines membership in his family.

I know in the past I have said that it is loving Jesus that unites us, but now I see that is not correct. It is doing Jesus' desires and doing his will which unites us. Now, I don't want you to think at this point that he is repudiating his family. I am not saying that you have to abandon your family. What a thing to say right after VBS when we have focused so extensively on family and bringing children up correctly. Jesus doesn't repudiate his family, but he does draw attention to the new family which has been created and which is centered on obedience to the will of the Father.

So when we call ourselves a family it has to be centered around the fact that we are actually doing the will of God. It isn't our Presbyterian belief system which makes us a family. It isn't our conservatism or our liberalism which makes us a family. We are family because we are committed to doing the will of God together as a church and individually when we are not in this four walls. Now, be careful, because over history this term family has been used to justify a lot of terrible things. Jim Jones and his "family" drank cool aide in Georgetown Guiana and died together. They clearly did not do the will of God. Hitler called his Aryan race a family and used it to kill millions, they clearly were not doing the will of God.

Today, some would draw us close because of their charisma, and they have a large following, but the measuring stick is always for a church, or for a movement, or for any charismatic individual, are they doing the will of God as reflected in Scripture? I have spoken to

a number of you who took part in the mission trips over this summer. The bonds that you created over those trips, the intensity of the experiences that you had were a result of you doing the will of God together as a group. There is no stronger bond than doing the will of God as a corporate body. That is what makes us, First Presbyterian, a family.