

## A New Family Name

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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.

On Mother's Day, how do I preach in such a way as to maintain integrity with the Scriptures and to help us all to grow more like Jesus in our relationships—as mothers and with our mothers? What do I say 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?" (May be you like the schmaltz. If so, you're in luck because there's plenty of it out there!)

Most of all, how do I share new insight and understanding, when the scriptures are so sparing in credible resources—when the best 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.

Given all of the above, perhaps you would indulge me this morning. Humor me; I'm still new. Perhaps you would tolerate some personal reminiscence as a way of moving into the subject, and into the Scripture I've chosen for the day.

**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.**

My late cousin, Pauline, rendered a great service to our family. She compiled a detailed genealogy going back eleven generations—all the way to the late the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when two Irish cousins, Charles and Samuel Robinson, immigrated to the American colonies just prior to the War of Independence.

Charles settled in New England and married the daughter of a man who later was an officer in the Continental Army, and who died at Saratoga. Interestingly, his commanding officer at Saratoga was Benedict Arnold—before he defected.

Samuel—our direct ancestor—settled in the south, bought a horse ranch and

for three generations was prosperous and influential in Atlanta circles. He and his son and his grandson sold horses to the Confederate Army—until General Sherman's "March to the Sea" wiped out that part of the Robinson legacy.

His son, my great, great, great grandfather, survived moved to Mobile, where he failed in a business attempt, and later to Natchez, where he married the daughter of a steamboat captain, and both he and his son also captained steamboats up and down the Mississippi River. My great grandfather, Charles Ada Robinson, had no heart for the River, and moved his family out west, to Eastland County near Ranger Texas.

Both my great grandfather and my grandfather punched cattle—participated in the great cattle drives along the old Chisholm Trail—real American cowboys! And we have letters exchanged between them and their wives while they were on the trail.

Connections. And therein lies my link to Mothers' Day.

I have memories of the old house built by my great grandfather. My last memories of my grandfather are associated with that drafty old farm house where the only plumbing was a hand pump over the kitchen sink. There were spaces between the window casings and the walls through which you actually could see daylight. In the winter they'd stuff newspapers in those openings; but it never worked.

In the dead of winter, the only heat came from a wood-burning cook stove in the kitchen (where it was always too warm), and a big rock fireplace in the parlor (where it was never quite warm enough).

I can still see my grandfather sitting in a big, wooden rocker in front of that fireplace, his lifeless legs draped with a quilt, a warm, hand-knitted shawl snuggled around his shoulders, his feet pushed into fur-lined, faded, brown slippers.

And I can see my grandmother sitting on a stool to one side of the fireplace—letting down the "bun" on the back of her head and brushing her long hair.

My sister and I loved to listen to the stories Granddaddy told: stories about his family coming, when he was six, in a covered wagon to west Texas; stories about his days as a cowpuncher along the old Chisholm Trail.

I recall seeing my grandfather sitting "tall in the saddle" riding out with the hired help in the late afternoon to bring up the cows to be milked. In these final memories, though, his body hardly functioned at all; he barely could feed himself; but when he told those stories, his face came alive: his dim eyes danced, and the words skipped across his tongue like a schoolgirl playing hop-scotch.

All too soon it would be time for bed. We'd put on flannel pajamas and back up the fireplace until we were almost ablaze, and then try to run and jump into bed

before they cooled down. Grandmother would put a brick on the hearth after supper and let it heat; then she'd wrap it in a towel and put it under the covers at our feet. And there were so many quilts piled on the bed that our toes would get sore trying to hold them up; but it never worked. We were always cold.

It was a drafty old house—unpainted exterior, squeaking floors, peeling wallpaper, no indoor bathroom... But there was one redeeming quality about that old house: my grandmother and grandfather lived inside.

Connections. Family. And family is more than genetics. One of our granddaughters is adopted, and, while there are not shared genes, there is never a question whether she is part of the family. She is loved as much as anyone else in the family. There is not hierarchy of love in family.

Family is more than blood. It is the common memories; the awareness of 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 is about: the connections; the 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 of circumstances. Being a mother in isolation—apart from some kind of family structure—multiplies the challenge. The security and support, and the sharing of important moments and the building of memories—the connections—are so important...

Family. Sometimes we talk about church as family; our text this morning reminds us that we share a common ancestry: we are children of God. It even suggests a family resemblance— **when he is revealed, we will be like him**—not in physical appearance, but in character and in righteousness.

Is the church really family? What are the stories that hold us together? Where have we been as a church family? What are the accepted roles that are played by the various members and generations of the family—or, do we have only elected officers with specific jobs to do, and have great difficulty recruiting people to serve in those jobs?

One of the great contradictions of our time is the simultaneous longing for connectedness and the obsession with privacy. The result is isolation.

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 give is 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, for we will see him as he is.***

**THE PASTOR'S PRAYER ON MOTHERS DAY:** God, we sometimes struggle to find meaningful new ways to fill the traditions and sacraments of life. Traditionally we share today as Mothers' Day and as the Festival of the Christian Home. We affirm that a family can be any group of persons united by their love and care for one another. Help each of us to be growing, contributing individuals in your worldwide family of persons:

- To those who gave birth this year to their first child—lead us in celebration with them.
- To those who lost a child this year—send us with loving expressions of comfort and hope.
- To those who are in the trenches with little ones every day; whose badges are white blouses stained with burped milk—give us words of support and appreciation.
- To those who suffered loss through miscarriage, failed adoptions or running way—guide us in our sharing of their grief.
- To those who walk the hard path of infertility, fraught with pokes, prods, tears and disappointment—help us to walk with them. Help them to forgive us when we say foolish things, and to know that we don't mean to make things harder than they are.
- To those who are foster moms, step moms, mentor moms and spiritual moms—help us to say what will help them to feel needed and appreciated.
- To those who have close and warm relationships with their children—give us words of appreciation; and to those who have disappointment, heart ache and distance from their children—lead us to sit with them.
- To those “same gender” partners who serve as both mother and father—grant us grace to be their extended families.
- To those who lost their mothers in the past year—give us words of encouragement and a touch of comfort.
- To those who experienced abuse at the hands of their own mothers—help us to acknowledge their experience and to affirm their value and worth as your sons and daughters.
- To those who have lived through driving tests, medical tests and the overall testing of motherhood—give us words to acknowledge that we are better for having them in our midst.
- To those who have aborted children—give us hearts of understanding and mercy.
- To those who are single and long to be mothering their own children—grant that our presence will be affirming and nurturing.
- To those who envision lavishing love on grandchildren—yet that dream is not to be, grant us compassionate empathy.
- To those who will have emptier nests in the coming year—make us a sanctuary of peace for the wide fluctuation of their emotions.
- To those who are pregnant with new life, both expected and surprising—help us to share their anticipation.
- And to all women—who, in the church become mother figures to so many—help them to know that we walk with them. Mothering is not for the faint of heart, and we thank you for the strength of all the mother figures in our lives, in the Spirit of Christ your Son, our Brother and Savior; Amen.