

The Home That Love Built

Acts 2:42-47

I, like many, grew up in a home that love built. I understood that as a child, though I don't think I would have imagined any other way of describing it. Good times and bad times, hugs and punishment, were part and parcel of the ways that love was expressed. I only came to note the differences in how love is perceived and experienced as I became aware of the dire circumstances of a few of my schoolyard friends living among the neighborhoods of Bangor, Maine.

My home was an average household in a pay-as-you-go world of little extravagance and a great deal of sharing. Typical to the post-war years, we embodied the Baby Boom nuclear family with four children (boys in our case), with a mother who stayed at home until we were all in school before entering the workforce as a teacher. We shared our bedrooms and our closets; we routinely wore hand-me-downs and gleaned winter coats and boots from rummage sales. My brothers and I would play outside after school with nary a concern for our safety or what mischief we might get into. Of course, everyone acted like extended family, as my friends' moms wouldn't hesitate to give me a scolding, as if they were doing my own mother a favor.

Compared to today, my childhood was relatively modest. We didn't have a lot of toys; we'd pull out our bag of marbles or baseball bats or make up our own entertainment with a little imagination. There were no organized sports teams for us to join, except for the church league basketball games we played at the local Y. For the most

part, kids figured things out for themselves. It was largely a world of sandlot games, pickup teams, and backyard rules.

Anchoring the daily routine was family dinner at 5:30 pm when everyone had to be present and accounted for and usually were. Meals were casual and unimaginative: my mother didn't pretend to be a gourmand; basic ingredients were prepared without much flourish. We had potluck-style casseroles, spaghetti or lasagna, leftovers from Sunday dinner, or whatever else could be made from memory or from the Betty Crocker cookbook. It wasn't fancy, but no one ever left hungry, either. If I didn't set the table, I had to scrape the dishes off or dry and put away what Dad had washed. After supper, I practiced the piano for 20 minutes, did whatever homework I had to do in order to watch TV for no more than an hour, then brushed my teeth and went to bed. With little variation in the daily schedule, life was plain, lovely, and good. It wasn't perfect, but for me that was what love was like.

By the time I became an adult and a parent, times and expectations had changed. One or two children in a household were sufficient; intentional parenting was the trend. Children were celebrated and valued for their uniqueness; mom and dad provided equal amounts of attention; a day off from work was devoted to family time. No one would feel left out or unnoticed by her parents. Each daughter was amply supplied with sets of clothes from parents, grandparents, and even from generous neighbors and friends. No one had to live with hand-me-downs.

I was dedicated to making certain our children wouldn't have the frugal upbringing I had; with my credit card in hand, they had

more Barbies and Carebears than they could ever use. Gifts weren't limited to birthdays and Christmas, either; a treat could come on the spur of the moment to make them happy and keep them entertained. It was a good life. Just like I do, our girls look back and remember fondly their upbringing. It was altogether different for them—a lot more indulgent, perhaps, but still punctuated with simple and pleasant memories. It wasn't without problems or flaws, mind you, but it was for them a home that love built.

A home that love built. Most of us have memories of times we remember well, places we hold dear when life seemed simpler and routinely pleasant. For those like me, it will be about sharing; for other like our girls, it will be about time and attention they received. For many, such a setting was in the home where they grew up with the primal relations of their lives; for others, it would be their present household or some other environment they recall fondly. Whatever it is, it is how we view love and how it gets expressed. In our mind's eye, we can visualize the people who made “home” special—those who warmed our hearts, who made us laugh, who comforted us in our tears, and who taught us how to love. Recollections will differ, to be sure, even within a family, but they speak to our human desire to experience love richly, beneficially, and meaningfully.

Obviously, we wish it would be the memory everyone recalls. But all too often, there may be a set of relationships that are biologically bound, but less so spiritually—where rivalries exist, or personality differences fray the fabric of family life, or where harm and hurt have permanently fractured the family structure. All too many, as we know, have toxic memories of their homelife.

Tolstoy's opening line to *Anna Karenina* speaks of that: "All happy families are alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way." In an article published last week in *Psychology Today*, family therapist Arthur Dobrin commented that families are like fire, as "forces for good or destruction."¹ That's a good way for looking at it. Like a fire, a family can produce warmth, brightness, and comfort and it can also burn like an uncontrollable and destructive force through the landscape of one's life.

When it's the latter, it then explains the guilt and resentment many feel when it comes to family matters—when we put up with those who take everything out of us but then don't return the favor to fill the empty cavity in our own souls with something that will sustain us. I hear stories all the time of well-intentioned, caring people who fear they're losing, not only patience, but love for their parents or children or siblings for justifiable reasons. In troubled families, it's hard work to keep the affection alive. After a while a person burns out and they don't have much love to give or the motivation to even interact with those who are supposed to be integral to their life. A person wants to be able to love his or her family and yet, being with them only creates a stress and strain that leaves them spiritually and emotionally worn down, withered, and withdrawn. When it gets to that point, all the Hallmark cards in the world won't change the true feelings one lives with.

Sometimes we have to acknowledge and recognize that the family we come from may not be the one we truly yearn for or that will sustain us with love. That's an important reality with which to

¹ Arthur Dobrin, "Family Values: Not Always a Good Thing," *Psychology Today*, May 6, 2014.

come to terms. It's okay not to carry guilt over it—regrets perhaps, but not guilt. Why? The home that love builds consists of relationships that are good for our souls, that lift our spirits, that respect who we are, that value who we've become, and that want to continue to be a part of our journey through life. Love is meant to heal our wounds, not inflict them; love is supposed to feed our souls, not starve them. Where we find our most meaningful and inspiring love is where, I think, we discover our true family.

This is one reason why, if we were to identify where the true fondness in our hearts lies, in all honesty it may or may not be with those who are related to us. Sometimes, the best sense of family comes from a circle of friends, or a group of neighbors, co-workers, colleagues, classmates, etc.—people with whom we spend our time and enjoy life. When congregations are at their best, when our aspirations of faith are realized in a genuinely caring environment, the kindred spirit felt among participants often becomes the only real home and safe place for some who gather. Those who aren't related, but still are like family to us, play critically important roles. They sustain us with love. We may view them as surrogates for those we love or they may be, in fact, the ones we love most. When we live into the meaning of the words that we proclaim from the pulpit and sing from our hymns, the church is a home that love builds. At times, we may take all of this for granted, or on occasion become irritated when something goes wrong; but much like the best functioning family, if the relationships are honest and genuinely caring, it's hard to live without such people in your life.

This is what I sense the primitive church provided for each one who chose to follow the teachings and way of Jesus. Our text from Acts is interesting to me, not only for what it says about social organization, but for what it conveys, i.e., a safe place and a spiritual home. A sense of family was created not on the basis of blood, but on the basis of belief—of shared values, aspirations, and commitment to the vision Jesus inspired within them and among them for the coming reign of God. What brought them together was not their common ancestry, but their common future in Christ as they were co-creators of the realm of God.

In several places, the Gospels stories imply that many of the disciples and other followers had left behind their natural families ties to join with Jesus—households somewhere in Galilee or Judea where they had been rooted up to that point. Though the early church included entire households coming into the faith community, most left parents, spouses, siblings, aunts, uncles, virtually all of their kinfolk ties in order to join and help create this new community based on the values that Jesus taught of the commonwealth of God, where lives were bound by mutual love and sharing, rather than by blood alone. As our text states:

All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.

One might say it was utopian and unrealistic to relate to others in this way—counterintuitive even to bind their lives this tightly to those who didn't necessarily have natural "tribal" characteristics in common, be they region, village, household, ethnicity, background, or blood. But as Luke tells us, many of them took this leap of faith to create a new

community built on familial-like ties, not only to replace what they had lost but, in particular, in response to Jesus and his word, which transformed their thinking about the ways neighbors, strangers, and even natural enemies were to be viewed and received. This would be a loving family that would transcend conventional definition.

Honestly, we can't be exactly sure how they lived out this model of mutual sharing and kindred ties. It's possible at first it took on the character of a single family household, everyone living together like in a kibbutz. Practically speaking, that could only be done on a small scale. It's also possible the relationships were similar to those we've experienced, where various members of a household would join together to create a new sense of community with those who joined with them in worship and at the temple, but would not actually live together. They would care for each other like family, though they came from many households. No one knows for certain. It likely changed over time.

However, it's clear that not only were material goods shared, so were meals, much like the proverbial potluck supper, or more akin to their memory, like the sharing of the loaves and fishes.

Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts...

The point being, the tie that bound together these early followers of Jesus was in becoming more than "family" to each other outside of their households and experiencing familial love in a deeper, more profound, and more sustaining way.

For many of us, this might be what we yearn for—to have relationships so integrally connected that our unique individuality

takes less focus than our commonality—that instead of letting material “stuff” define who we are relative to others, we experience love by intentional sharing and caregiving. That’s not unlike what we still do when we are at our best. These deeply meaningful, genuine, respectful, mutually serving, and personally caring friends and loved ones help us to be our best and to be willfully selfless as we express Christ-inspired love to one another. They are the spiritual home for our hearts as we carry on throughout life.

It’s good for us to be mindful that our lives are meant to be bound to each other—that we not only should become acquainted on a surface level as friends, but that we might even know and relate to each other like family. For some, this church might be their only family-like experience, where they seek and find the love and support they might not give and receive elsewhere in their lives. It’s their safe place, where they are not judged or criticized or traumatized by abuse. Instead, they find their peace, a sense of comfort and wellbeing, and deep and soulful friendships that help sustain them. We can be that for each other; we might be surrogate mothers, fathers, brothers or sisters, or sons and daughters for one another. If we do this well, no greater ministry can we offer to a person’s soul.

Ours is a home that love built. It’s a comfortable, enjoyable, endearing and redeeming place to be. It’s a place most, if not all, of us want to be. Consider all I’ve said today as we value the relationships in our lives. May each of us find a safe place to be, i.e., our spiritual home—a place of belonging with relationships to cherish. May all of us build such homes with love.

The Rev. Dr. Paul C. Hayes, Noank Baptist Church, Noank CT
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