

Deuteronomy 6:4-9

⁴Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone.^[a] ⁵You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem^[b] on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Colossians 3:12-17

¹²As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. ¹³Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord^[a] has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. ¹⁴Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. ¹⁵And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. ¹⁶Let the word of Christ^[b] dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.^[c] ¹⁷And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

“Family” How do you define the word, “family”? Here is some help from the Merriam-Webster dictionary.

- 1) The basic unit in society traditionally consisting of two parents rearing their children.
- 2) A group of individuals living under one roof and usually under one head.
- 3) A group of persons of common ancestry.
- 4) A group of people united by certain convictions or a common affiliation” (www.merriam-webster.com).

These are just 4 out of 8 definitions given in the Webster dictionary. Something that I noticed was that as the definitions continue, the scope becomes broader and more general. It started with what they call “basic unit of parents rearing children, to “groups” under the same roof or common ancestry and then with a commonality of some kind... if you have the time, I encourage you to find the dictionary and continue reading through the other definitions as it continues to be more general and broader.

I think this dictionary models for us what we would say if we were asked to define the word “family”. More likely than not, we would probably begin with a picture in our minds of our latest family portrait or a holiday gathering and try to explain what that looks like. However, I want to challenge us a bit this morning. What if you were in a different context: if you lived in a different culture, a different family dynamic than what you have today, if your values and priorities were different, would you picture the same family portrait or holiday gathering to define what family is?

Currently, as a church, we are engaged in a sermon series called, “hymns of community” where we are concentrating on different kinds of communities while singing hymns that help us on that focal point. Last week, Pastor Becky began this sermon series by helping us look at the Trinity, God, Son, and Holy Spirit as community, and how we fit in. We set the Trinity as the most basic and best model of what community is to look like. And this week we are looking at “family” as community, singing hymns with words helping us focus on what family is. In weeks ahead, we will be looking at Nation, Church, world, and creation, each as a community.

Today, as we talk about family as community, I want to introduce you to just a couple contexts to challenge all of us to think deeper about what we call family in hopes of maybe broadening that picture in our minds, and to create a deeper bond within our current context.

You probably have heard and have used the proverb, “It takes a village to raise a child”, which is a well-known African proverb that means that an entire community must interact with children for them to experience and grow in a healthy environment. In the Korean community however, they take it a step further- that everyone is related. Everyone, even people who meet for the first time are referred to as a relative: brother or sister, aunt or uncle, grandmother or grandfather. No matter if it’s a waiter or waitress, a store clerk or someone you sit next to on the train, they can be called a relative in some way. That is why you would often hear Aria calling you either grandma or grandpa, uncle or aunt, or the children in our church as big sister or big brother. Referring to everyone as a relative is not just the way to call each other, but the people of the Korean community truly start a relationship with the respect “assigned” to that person as a relative. When children come across a senior on the street, they would treat that senior with the same respect as their own grandmother or grandfather in their household. The older cashier at the store would be treated with the same respect as a person’s aunt or uncle, and a slightly older person who would be called big brother or sister, would be treated with the same respect as their own big brother or sister. You may question if there would be negatives to this collective family in community. There sure are. Sometimes, “stranger” and relative alike would ask very personal questions and expect an answer while they would also make awkward comments with no reservations. (It can get pretty awkward from American culture point of view). Koreans are quick to take honor and pride in celebrating another Korean's achievements and successes as if it were their own. They would also be quick to be ashamed and be disgraced and take the blame if someone in the Korean community committed a crime and be quick to apologize as if it was their own mistake. For example, the time when there was a Korean kid who was involved in the mass shooting in Virginia Tech years ago. This would be so engraved in the minds and actions of the Korean people. The reason for this is that for centuries, as far as the Korean history would go, which is at least 5000 years, the Korean people until recently a decade ago, have lived as farming communities. One household would have at least 4 generations living together, and if you imagine each parent having at least 8 children each, that household would be very large, almost a whole town size where literally everyone would be a relative. In addition to that, most literally, Koreans use a term, “URI”, a term referring to the collective self, indicative of a sense of oneness or family with others. When we Americans refer to things with possessive adjective “MY” Koreans would innately use “URI” literally translated as “us, our, and we”: Our mother, Our church, our family. It is all due to the Korean

notion of the collective self, that everyone is family and are connected and is an extension of self. As the Korean people discouraged cross cultural/cross racial marriages until pretty recently, the people of the Korean community were able to continue in this collective notion that everyone is a relative.

It's different but not too different from how we refer to each other in this family of the church! Often in pastoral letters, we pastors greet you as brothers and sister in Christ. We acknowledge that we find our identity as fellow creation with God who is the father of creation, and then as adopted children of God in our baptism, becoming brothers and sisters with Christ and heirs to all that God offers to us. Also, we, who gather as a church, gather with our common highest priority being what we read in the scripture passages today: One is from Deuteronomy 6, what the Jewish community calls the Shema, "the Hear" the most important prayer. "Hear O Israel, The Lord is one! Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, and might!" and the other, of living as Christ lived, in loving another other as Christ lived, outlined in the Colossians text. As Apostle Paul urged the Colossians, we are reminded that as believers in Christ Jesus, we are to "be bound together in perfect harmony, to allow Christ to rule in our hearts and to be of one body... to giving thanks to God the Father." We are to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience and to bear with one another and forgive each other as God forgives each of us.

Living this out, the early church from the first to the second century experienced persecution in the Roman Empire. Historians say, "Among other things, Christians were crucified, fed to lions, dragged behind mad bulls, burned at the stake, torn apart by dogs, and subjected to the iron chair, a metal chair heated until it was red hot and then Christians were forced to sit on it naked," all because they refused to worship Roman gods while worshiping Jesus. They were also accused of cannibalism, which you can guess where that came from which is total misunderstanding, and incest, as they found Christians referring to each other as brothers and sisters, joining in "love feasts". I'm sure those who wanted to persecute Christians could find anything to accuse them of slander, (thank God Christians are not persecuted in this country). But I do wonder how "loud" these Christians had lived to have others hear of their Christian practices of Holy Communion and love for one another in referring to each other as brothers and sisters. Do others in our community know enough about us at UMCG to see that we share in this kind of brotherly, sisterly love with one another? Do others in our community see the love we have for each other and others like family?

While preparing for this sermon, a Disney movie I watched in 2002 came to mind. Have you seen "Lilo and Stitch?" It takes place in a Hawaiian community with Lilo, a little girl who was being raised by her sister Nani after their parents died in a car accident. As they struggled to stay together as a family, Lilo happen upon an alien creature named Experiment 626 disguised as a dog who is given the name "Stitch" after being adopted by Lilo. As a troublesome child herself, Lilo finds Stitch whose destructiveness is comforting, and they develop a close bond through the concept of "Ohana" or extended family. At the end of the film, Lilo, Nani, and Stitch show by example what their parents taught them before their passing, "Ohana means family. Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten." Nani shows her little sister unconditional love, even when she created problems for her sometimes.

Lilo shows grace to Stitch who was very different, as they were unwilling to let go of each other even when the opportunity came to where they could abandon one another.

Ohana means family... family means no one gets left behind or forgotten... what a Christian concept, one we as the church strive to live by no matter the circumstances. Where ever we go, whatever family we find ourselves in, could we choose to live as a family where no one gets left behind or forgotten? Could we treat one another as our close family members to love them no matter the circumstances?

What would it look like if we lived a collective self or a culture of the whole community as family? How are we at UMCG in living as one family, Ohana? What would Ohana look like in the midst of the difficulties within our denomination as we continue to struggle with the inclusivity of our LGBTQ brothers and sisters? What would Ohana look like in the midst of the difficulties within the US borders with our immigrant brothers and sisters, our children and racism? What would Ohana look like in the midst of stigmas against people of other faiths? What would Ohana look like in the midst of the stigmas against mental illness and poverty?

How does “our” family, not “my” but OUR Family live out God’s love? Ohana means Family. Family means no one is left behind or forgotten.

May the hymns we continue to sing in worship today be prayers and hope for our family!

Benediction:

Always be thankful.

Let the words of Christ, in all their richness,
live in your hearts and make you wise.
Use His words to teach and counsel each other.
Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts.
And whatever you do or say,
let it be as a representative of the Lord Jesus,
all the while giving thanks through Him to God the Father.
And may the blessing of God,
the love of Jesus Christ,
and the presence of the Holy Spirit
strengthen and encourage you
as you go out from here
to live lives of gratitude and service. **Amen.**