

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Pentecost 2

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

Families are the bedrock of any society. Families offer a safe place for children to grow, to be nurtured and to be taught values that are meant to shape their lives as they make their way through life one transition after the other. Families are the kind of institution that offers itself as an anchor holding steady our little minds which is always wandering and our fragile selves which always needs healing. Families are like an anchor holding its members in times of stormy seas. Sometimes it feels like we are an island sitting in the midst of a vast ocean, but our families are often our only connection to a real assurance we are not alone.

However terrible or dysfunctional a family may be, there is always at the bottom, hidden within the crevasses of pain, disappointment, and absolute horror, is a kind of love that only wished it had had a chance to grow, blossom and manifest itself. Underlying any sense of grief or the tears that roll down our cheeks over an estranged relationship with a loved one-with family, is a kind of love that still relishes the laughter of yesteryear and dreams of a future open to the possibility of reconciliation.

In traditional societies family connotes an expansive interpretation. In these societies, the adage “it takes a village to raise a child” makes a lot of sense because every child is connected in a web of relationship with folks who may or may not be related by blood but do command a stake in the life of that child.

This stake confers a great deal of authority on an adult, but it also places an equal responsibility as well. And because such societies believe that a child is a gift to the entire village, community or family; the village, family or community has some sort of a responsibility in helping fashion the life of any child.

Growing up, my dad had a checkered relationship with some of his siblings but he was estranged from one of his younger brothers. Although I lived with my mum, one of the responsibilities of my little brother, sister and I were to go to our dad's house after school, check on him and to greet him. The next stop will be the house of an uncle who lived right across from my dad, then to my aunt's house and lastly to the uncle with whom my dad was estranged, before we go home to my mum's house.

In spite of their estrangement, not once did he prevent me and my younger siblings from visiting this particular uncle. In fact, he was the one who tasked us to pass by his office and greet him. And as a kid, I really didn't think much about this daily routine, but however unusual as it was, it simply reflected the extensive and broader reach of what it meant to be family, that even when adults are estranged from each other, efforts should be made not to involve kids in the dispute. Upon my father's passing, I came to realize that the depth of their disaffection did not even matter, for underneath the charade of supposed hostility to the other was a fertile heart which longed for the warm embrace of the other. My father's passing brought to the fore chaos and confusion among my twenty something siblings. But it was the estranged brother of my dad who became the unifier, the one that sought and worked as hard as he could for the wellbeing of all.

See, there is something to be said about family unity, and in fact a family's desire to seek out the wellbeing of a loved one. Families often go the extra mile to seek counseling of varied forms to help with addiction, illness and other psychosocial problems. Families offer the best of support that they can muster: families can be relied upon to strengthen, encourage and seek out the other.

And so even though Jesus had not been clinically diagnosed with any mental issues, for his detractors and his family, he was insane. By the standard of his critics, there was something about what he said and did that made him appear to be beside himself or even be possessed by a demon.

Their idea of a demon isn't any different from the serpent who tricked Eve into eating the fruit of good and evil, nor is it any different from Beelzebul- the other evil power which Jesus is being accused of possessing. The prevailing understanding of these mythical figures was one that perceived them as having the sole aim of destroying the creatures of God and hampering the human effort to be right with God.

But the profound nature of the question that Jesus is asking the detractors who came down from Jerusalem is, if the purpose of these figures was to destroy God's creation, or to be an impediment between God and humans, why then do you accuse me of being possessed by any one of them, if all I did was to offer respite to the weary and healing to the sick? If all I did was to restore to fullness that which was broken?

In his defense, Jesus argues, if the point of these mythical figures was their exposure of human weakness; the very weakness upon which these figures supposedly prey, why then do you accuse me of being their agent, if all I did was to teach the ways in which people can overcome the weaknesses which plagues them?

If the story of Eden is about the results of human failures, Paul isn't dismissing the weakness of what he calls the outer body or the earthly tent, to him, the outer body that is wasting away is not only endemic to human weakness, but it is symbolic of our inability to withstand the blight of temptations, irrespective of where that temptation is coming from or who tempting us. And so whether it is the serpent which is enticing the woman with an apple, or the woman who is enticing the man with an apple, it really doesn't matter who or what is enticing who with aspersions, deceit or trickery, we fall for them.

Having therefore fallen for the deceit or bought into the accusations of those who could not tolerate Jesus, Mary and his children do as families do; they went to restrain Jesus, to bring him home, to save him and themselves.

For Mary then, whatever little honor that they had was being destroyed: Jesus was ruining it. And as we can tell from stories we have heard about honor killings, protecting the honor of a family is so important that in some societies, some are willing to kill their own kin who dares to desecrate the honor of their families.

When Jesus heard that his family was out there seeking him, not because of a burning desire to see him, but to save him, he asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Who is family? He seems to be asking. Does family comprise of only those who are related by blood? Jesus doesn’t seem to think so.

Jesus expands our definition of family with the claim that those who do the will of God are my brother and sister, mother and father. Indeed, if the new community that is defining itself as followers of Jesus is to thrive, it has to look beyond the simple labels of brother and sister, mother and father. If the new community is to function as a family, just like Jesus intended, then we honor each member and ourselves when the burden of one must become the burden of all-that to me is what doing the will of God is all about. Amen.