

## COMING HOME, PART 4: FAMILY LOVE

John 14:16-19, 2 Peter 1:7-9, 2 Corinthians 13:4-5 (NASB)

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Several years ago Barb and I observed what had become a Christmas tradition for us as a couple. We went Christmas shopping--separately. We do not consider this a breakdown in our relationship, but a wise management of time--parallel processing, as my computer-programmer wife likes to put it. We agreed to just pick something up for supper instead of meeting, and to stay out until the stores closed.

I elected to eat at a Chinese buffet which has a Mongolian barbecue where you can build a meal from raw foods and have them cooked right in front of you. I built my custom creation, watched it being cooked, tipped the guy, and went back to my seat. He was not very friendly--probably had his fill of discourteous Americans. As I sat there alone and began to eat I had what modern people call an existential moment. God calls it something else.

Right in front of me was a well-dressed African American young man with a digital organizer in a holster on his belt. He was having supper with his mom, who was also well-dressed, and they were having a good conversation. Behind them was a mom and dad, son, and grandpa. Dad had a bad cough--perhaps the source of a flu I had that year--and the son was a little unruly. I did not pay them much attention until mom and dad were up at the buffet and grandpa had to issue some corrective bark to his grandson. Only then did I look up and notice that the boy had a stoma--a surgically-created breathing hole--in the front of his neck with a tube in it held on by a strap.

To my left was a family which I surmised to be comprised of a grandpa, daughter, and granddaughter, since they all looked alike. They were having an animated discussion about their family business. Later I saw that grandpa was so stooped over when he used his walker that his upper body was almost parallel to the ground. Behind me was a family with two elementary age kids, a boy and a girl. I had met the boy at the buffet when he spilled a gigantic plate of fries on the floor, almost down my pant leg. He laboriously picked up every last one and walked dejectedly back to his table, where mom and dad explained that everything was all right and he could go back and get some clean ones.

As I sat in front of my hot food, surrounded by families, eating by myself, I suddenly had a perception of what it would mean to be completely alone. What if I had to eat like that all the time? What if I had no family waiting at home for me, eager to compare the results of our gift shopping? What if my mom and dad were gone, my sister and brother were gone, and I had no wife? What if I were friendless? No pastor, no church family? The thought of that possibility filled me with fear and sadness, and I thanked God especially well for that meal with the knowledge that he has surrounded me with loving family relationships.

And then I thought of the people who actually are that alone. Along with the families in the restaurant, there were a few solitary individuals. Perhaps their reality was described exactly by the vision of lonely existence in the familiar line attributed to Jean-Paul Sartre: "Alone and afraid, in a world I never made." What if even heaven were empty?

## A FAMILY LOVE BEYOND ALL OTHERS

This fourth study in the fourteenth chapter of John's gospel brings to the one who trusts in Christ the most tender words, affirming to us that we will never be alone when we enter the family love of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus said: kavgw. evrwth, sw to.n pate, ra kai. a;llon para, klhton dw, sei u`mi/n( i[na meqV u`mw/n eivj to.n aivw/na h=|, to. pneu/ma th/j avlhqei, aj( o] o` ko, smoj ouv du, natai labei/n( o[ti ouv qewrei/ auvto. ouvde. ginw, skei\ u`mei/j ginw, skete auvto( o[ti parV u`mi/n me, nei kai. evn u`mi/n e;staiÅ Ouvk avfh, sw u`ma/j ovrfanou, j( e;rcomai pro.j u`ma/jÅ e;ti mikro.n kai. o` ko, smoj me ouvke, ti qewrei/( u`mei/j de. qewrei/te, me( o[ti evgw. zw/ kai. u`mei/j zh, sete (John 14:16-19, Nestle-Aland GNT, 26th ed.).

If that sounds strange to you, *koine* (common) Greek is exactly how God chose to communicate these precious truths to us. Here is how it reads in English: **"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you. After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also"** (John 14:16-19).

We have already learned in this study series that Christ has prepared a place for those who believe in him in the Father's house in heaven, where a personal relationship with God himself is the eternal cure for our essential aloneness. But what about now, while we are still here living on a ruined planet, stricken by the fall? Is there any reason to think that we won't just have to "grin and bear it" alone until Christ comes back for us?

Christ gives a wonderful promise of family love with God which begins immediately at the point when we become children of God by faith: **"I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever..."** (John 14:16). Christ had just gotten done frightening the disciples by telling them that he was going to leave them via crucifixion. In his place he would send the Helper, the Holy Spirit. The term "Helper" is *parakletos* in Greek, a rich concept which could be translated helper, advocate, counselor, comforter, and encourager. It has the idea of someone called alongside you to support you in whatever way necessary.

The flu I had that year provided me with a clear picture of a helper. My wife, Barb, made sure I had the right foods, cold drinks for the fever, and medicines from the pharmacy. She adjusted the house thermostat to compensate for my swings from feverish sweats to chills. She checked to make sure that I was taking my medicine. She covered for my ministries where possible. She did yard work I should have helped her with. She stuck close by me--though not too close!--to support me through my illness. I try to do the same for her.

Not all of us have such human partners. But every believer in Jesus Christ has a Helper in the Holy Spirit who gives a kind of help no human family can provide. Furthermore, the companionship of the Holy Spirit is continual and eternal. There is never a time when God is not walking side by side with his children through the agency of the Holy Spirit.

A Star Trek episode from the 1960's illustrated just how much our hearts yearn for this relational connection. The story is that a starship captain becomes marooned on a planet. He has a decent hut and strangely, seems to have what he needs with little effort on his part. He appears to be utterly alone. But when Captain Kirk, First Officer Spock, and Doctor McCoy locate the man and try to take him home, he resists. Much to their surprise, he will not leave.

He tells them that he has a relationship with an invisible being called the Companion. The Companion comes and goes at irregular times, and seems not to have a normal body. Finally, the away team gets to see the stranded Star Fleet officer meeting with the Companion. The man becomes surrounded by a swirling cylinder of reflective sparkles, and his expression takes on the intensity of the greatest bliss as he tilts his head back, closes his eyes, breaks into a sublime smile as he enjoys-- companionship! Apparently, he has discovered the sweetest thing in his whole life.

What this limited representation depicts is real for the believer in Jesus Christ in a way never imagined by the science fiction writers. Christ went on to explain more about the Helper, who **"...is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you"** (John 14:17). Just how intimate is the companionship of the Helper? He will not only be alongside the believer in Christ, he will actually indwell him or her.

At this point in our study I am tempted to just send us all out into a field somewhere with a Bible to read and reread these words until God gives us a revelation of what they mean. How can I explain something more profound than I can comprehend? At the least I can say that our deepest needs for family love--for secure, meaningful relationships--are fully satisfied by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit of God. One of the greatest heart needs of every human being is to find the answer to the question: Does anyone love me? The Holy Spirit not only answers the question, he brings the answer in his person to become the deepest inward reality of your life. So if your heart is crying out for love, know that you must look to God first and always. No pastor, friend, lover, or family member can satisfy that deepest need.

I can also say that part of the reason he is called the Spirit of truth is that he brings to his relationship with us not a single misrepresentation of himself or us--no spinning of the truth, no dodging reality, no putting doilies on heaps of our personal garbage, no air freshener in the sewage treatment plant of our lives. This is disorienting. Everyone is dirty and bends the truth to cover it, right? No. We simply have no experience of that which is utterly pure and true. Until God does a regenerating work on our hearts and minds, we cannot even perceive such things. More on that in a moment, but suffice to say that the unreserved love of the Holy Spirit brings with it not the slightest reason to be on our guard. When he comes to indwell us, we all receive the challenge to tear our hearts open to him with nothing held back. Total vulnerability is appropriate with him, and no one else. To the extent that we refuse to be vulnerable to our Lord we refuse the satisfaction of the family love he offers.

Why is it family love, not just interpersonal love? Jesus went to explain to his disciples in verse 18: **"I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you"** (John 14:18). When Christ promised to come to his disciples here he seems to be going beyond his second coming. Orphans have no earthly parent to be with them and watch over them, and he is explaining that when he sends the Helper, he will indwell them as well. He is speaking of present-tense fellowship for daily life. Where the believer walks, Christ walks also. We do not have to walk through this ruined world alone if we receive Christ into our hearts in this way. We have been invited to participate in the love of the three persons of the Holy Trinity. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the real holy family, and we are invited to join. When the Spirit comes to indwell, Christ comes to indwell.

You can tell by this that we are not speaking of a love which is controlled by sentimentality. We have not been invited into a relationship of romantic mush as is the usual depiction in our entertainment media. It is both manly and womanly at the same time because it is godly family love.

Finally, Christ promises distinctive family realities for the believer: **"After a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me; because I live, you will live also"** (John 14:19). How sad for those who have not trusted Christ! Unless they receive him they are doomed to seek the satisfaction of family love for which they were created and never find it, even in the best of human relationships. That they cannot even see Christ on their own is reason for at least two determined actions of the believer. We must pray that God will open their eyes and hearts to him, and we must share the good news of Christ with our words and lives. Our prayers and sharing are the means to their only hope.

And our family relationship with Christ becomes our source of spiritual life. We want to know him, love him, and serve him. We find an energy for the things of God. We discover the truth that he is our deepest satisfaction. Because he lives, we can face tomorrow and every day, come what may! When we receive him we receive his life as well.

Recently I watched a video testimony of coming to Christ from famous daredevil Evel Knievel near the end of his life. It did not appear that he had quite gotten fully cleaned up from all of his wild living. Yet it was obvious that this rough fellow had discovered that faith in Christ brought to him a surprising love and energy for the things of God. Thank you for sharing your faith, Mr. Knievel.

## OUR PERSONAL ASSESSMENT

Sadly, the mark of the church at the beginning of the twenty-first century is not that we are finding our greatest satisfaction, life, and joy in the context of family love in the Father's house. A recent in-depth study of discipleship commissioned by Pastor Bill Hybels of Willow Creek Community Church indicates that not only in his own church, but across the board Christians today are struggling to enter into the core realities of fellowship with God. What does it mean that we have millions of Christians who attend church but who barely ever read their own Bibles or pray? They seem not to be overcoming the sins of the flesh or advancing in love and service to Christ as you would expect.

One possibility is that many of us, partly due to huge cultural trends toward materialism and narcissism, are backslidden Christians who have forgotten the significance of our redemption. Perhaps it's time to bring back the old-fashioned word "backslider." When purported believers stop caring about

Christ and resume sinful behaviors they are backsliders. Peter wrote to the New Testament era church: **"For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins"** (2 Peter 1:9). Peter gave a list of diagnostic indicators of the human soul which culminates in brotherly kindness and love. Follow this logic: If the entire Holy Trinity is indwelling us and is our delight, we will not be lacking in the life energies of holy living, love for God, and love for people. Those life energies will spill out of us. If this lack describes you, and you know you are saved, then I advise you to repent of backsliding, clear the decks in your life and seek God again with all your heart. He will guide even the process of your return to him because he wants you back so much.

Another reason for not being able to see Christ in a lost world, not having fellowship with him or knowing the joys of his presence is simply that we do not know him. We're just plain lost! The Apostle Paul had this concern about the Corinthian church which was graced with every spiritual gift, yet some of them had such bad behavior that he wrote: **"Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-- unless indeed you fail the test?"** (2 Corinthians 13:5). If you fail the basic spiritual life indicators you need to invite Christ into your life for the first time. You need to confess to God that you are sinner, and that you cannot save yourself; believe that Jesus is Lord, that he died to pay for your sins, and rose again to give you new life; receive his forgiveness and the eternal life he offers. Confess, believe, receive.

How fortunate for me that at the end of my lonely meal and night of solo shopping I went home to a loving wife and two loving sons. How blessed for me that I, even when eating alone, had the steady, solid fellowship of the Holy Spirit, the indwelling Christ, and the love of God the Father upon me. Sometimes people complain about Thanksgiving and Christmas because they require attendance at family gatherings with difficult relatives. If you attend church at all you sometimes inevitably struggle with difficult relationships in the body of Christ. There is something immensely worse than difficult relationships in this lost and broken world—having none! Adoption as a son or daughter into the family of God is the effective cure for even the most alone, abandoned person in the whole world.

Whatever your personal status with God, ask him to give you a moment of revelation to see your aloneness without him. May he show you that no earthly love can satisfy your heart. And may he help you to let down every protective barrier in the way of the deep satisfaction of fellowship with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That's what life in God is all about.