

14th July 2024 – Eighth Sunday after Pentecost

Ephesians 1:3-6

GRACIOUS LOVE

Family. A word which covers a pretty broad description. How would you define it? One definition I found said, ‘a group of two or more persons related by birth, marriage or adoption who live together’. That’s ok, but it has its limitations; eg what about when your children grow up and leave home, we still consider them to be family. Another definition I found is; ‘the people who support and love you, and the people who you can confide in and trust’. That’s ok too, but then we might think; what about our close friends? We may well get on better with some of them than with our own family, but does that mean we call them ‘family’? Added to this, we have families who are not all related through birth but have come together in different ways. I come from one, and my own family is one of these. And these blended families aren’t new. One of my great great grandfathers had 12 children; six from his first wife who then died, and then he remarried and had another six with his second wife. Even though they were family, you would have to think there wouldn’t have been the closest of relationships between the oldest and the youngest of these siblings.

How do we define family then? It’s still not a great definition, but I would do it with the words ‘unconditional love’. Not all families are perfect, in fact none of them are, but even though we might not see or talk to all of our family members that often, or have a lot in common with them or get on with them very well, that unconditional love is still generally there. The example I always think of with this is when our first grandson was born eight and a half years ago. Karen was already down in Adelaide, and the boys and I were flying down from Darwin early on Christmas Eve, leaving Darwin airport at 2am to get to Adelaide at 6am. Our daughter went into labour a few hours before we took off, and checking in with Karen just before we boarded there was still no news. Over the next four hours (I don’t sleep on planes, even in the middle of the night), I kept thinking about how

much I loved that little boy. That's all I knew about him, that he was a boy. I didn't know his hair or eye colour, his personality, what he would like and not like, not even his name. But that didn't matter, he was my family. Somehow that gave me a very profound sense of what unconditional love is all about. Now, eight and a half years later and knowing him really well I still love him like that, and, bonus, he has also turned out to be a kid who is really cool to hang out with.

Unconditional love. Family. Not surprisingly considering how God's love works with us, the Bible uses a lot of language and terms based around 'family' to describe God's relationship with us, and our relationship with other Christians. In this reading here we read that 'God had Christ choose us to live with him' (4b), 'God was kind and decided that Christ would choose us to be God's own adopted children' (5), and, 'God treated us with undeserved grace because of the Son he dearly loves' (6a). It is undeserved, unconditional, love. It is both what we often refer to as 'grace', and also the kind of language we often use in relation to family.

Have a think about what this means for us, where our relationship with God begins. Verse 4 reminds me of when I was in the plane before the birth of my grandson; not knowing anything about him but that I loved him unconditionally even then. When did God choose to love us and to have us live with Him? Before the world was created (4a), it's that far back. Even then God knew that we wouldn't be perfect; He gave us this thing called Free Will so we would have a full relationship with Him, but He also knew that it gave us the ability to rebel against Him, and that we would do that. But still, He loved us. That's unconditional love. That's gracious love.

From the unconditional love of their parents, and grandparents, a child receives care, shelter, nurture, support, and encouragement in a way which is completely sacrificial and giving. What do we receive from the gracious love of God? It's summed up very simply at the beginning here as the, 'spiritual blessings that Christ has brought us from heaven!' (3b). What are those blessings? Forgiveness for our rebellion, our selfishness, our mistakes, our wandering from God's path. Forgiveness from God even for those things we find it hard to forgive ourselves for. Hope in God's love, care, provision, even when things seem tough and hopeless; when life feels like it's going against

us, when we feel like we are being attacked from every angle, when we can't see a way out ourselves, hope in knowing that God's love for us is always there, and remembering that He keeps His promises and He will see us through as He has before. The peace in knowing the strong certainty of God's love. Joy in knowing the new life which is ours through all Jesus has done for us. When we think about it, what is listed here as 'spiritual blessings' really covers so much, and makes such a difference both for this life now and our life forever.

Our response to all that we receive is summed up very simply both at the beginning and the end of this reading. One word; Praise. Praising God for all we receive. What's that look like? Of course, it is praising God when we come together, as His family, for worship. In the same way that we like it when our family get together to share our love, God likes it when His family come together in love and praise. And we also praise God in the way we live our lives; doing our best to serve others in the way He calls us to do. Forgiving as we are forgiven. Living lives which show what it means that we do receive God's spiritual blessings through Jesus, that His love has and does make a difference to our lives. Doing what we can, every day, to help others to see what this is all about also.

And using this image of family to talk about God's love for each one of us, how do we now live with our Christian family. As families go, the Christian family is pretty standard, isn't it? There are the people we like, get on well with, share similar interests, and generally like being around. And then there are those who apart from being family members, we don't have a lot in common with, and like a family Christmas dinner around a large table, who can even rub us up the wrong way. That applies to people from other Christian traditions and churches, as well as to those we see and worship regularly with in our own congregations. What's our calling in our Christian family? Love. Unconditional love. Gracious love. To do what we each can to be forgiving, to work and help one another together, to get on together. No family is perfect, neither is any group of people. As I write this a picture of our family together last Christmas has popped up on the digital photo frame beside my desk. They are a varied bunch, and as much as we love having them together it is hard work keeping the balances right and everyone happy. But we are family, so we do that. And to see a picture

like that makes me happy that all these people who we dearly love come together like this. I know the dynamics are going to change as the children get older and go out themselves, I've been through that with my own family. But for now, despite the effort, despite the possible tensions and even tears, it is worth having those you love come together like this.

How does God feel then, as our Father, the One who even sent His Son to die so that this kind of belonging and unity could be possible, how does He feel when we all come together; to worship Him, to praise Him, to work together in sharing His love, to work together in helping others to know Him? It is an easy question to answer, because it is talked about here and elsewhere; this is part of what praising God is all about. God wants that close relationship with us so much that He sent Jesus to die so that we can have this. In His gracious love He has done everything He can so we can now be His children, in His family, and do what we can to live our lives in this way.

God calls, invites, and brings us into His family through His love, a love He has shown in choosing us all to receive His unconditional love, and in sending Jesus to give His life so we can receive all that God wants to give to us. This family is not defined just by love, but 'Gracious Love' – love which is unending, underserved, fully and freely giving and forgiving. And now, as those who have received this love, we are also called to share it. Know that through God's love you are a part of His family, and each day pray that He will help you to live His gracious love out in your life. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- Think about your own family: what are the relationships in your family you are thankful for? Which relationships cause you stress or pain? If you have any relationships which aren't as you wish them to be, pray for God to lead and guide you to do what you can to repair them.
- God loves each one of us completely and unconditionally in His gracious love. What does this mean to you? Are there any times or situations in your life when this is particularly meaningful for you?
- When we know God's love, we are called to live it out in our relationship both with Him and with others. How does this look for you? Are there any parts of these relationships which you can focus on more? If needed, spend time in prayer to ask God to help you with this.

Pray: thank God that we live in His gracious love each day. Ask Him to lead us to show and share this love in how we both worship and praise Him and share His love with others.

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14.07.2024*