

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
The Five Part Story: God Calls a Family
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Genesis 12:1-4; Romans 11:17-24

Today we are looking at the third part of our five-party story. God chooses a family. Now the idea of family can be complicated for many of us. For some, family is not a particularly inspiring or joyful word. But this family we will be talking about today is more than genealogies and 23 and me. This is a chosen family. Our chosen family can have traditional family members in it, but it also includes the friends who are more committed to us than others. The ones who have stuck by us through things that make them more like family, in our eyes, after the struggle is overcome. A regular friend is someone we know and like to hang out with. Normal friendships come and go. When times get hard, regular friends leave, but when you are part of a chosen family there is a deeper commitment to stay in the relationship through those hard times. Often there is a shared goal or ideals. There is even an expectation that they will help each other become better people. When God puts together a family this is the commitment it is founded on. They will stick together through the hard times and help each other be the best version of themselves.

When God chooses a family, the world is a mess. Humanity has wandered far from God and sin has spread fast and taken a strong hold on creation. God has tried many different ways to get through to humanity. In fact, by chapter 12 of Genesis we are already on plan E. Humanity has messed the other plans up. Plan A was Eden, Adam and Eve messed that up with a quick snack. Plan B was not to restart everything. Instead God let Adam and Eve live with their new knowledge. That ended up with a flood and Noah started Plan C. Plan C worked for a while, but then humanity tried to invade heaven with a huge tower and God had to send them to different corners of the earth to think about what they had done, Plan D.

God's original plan hasn't ever changed, the implementation has just been adjusted. The plan has always been to bless the whole world. The problem is the channels through which God blesses the world keep getting gummed up by sin. So, God gets to thinking again about another way to bring blessings into the world. This time the plan is a family, Plan E. God wants to start a family like none other. A family that would be the example to the rest of the world of what life is like with God. One group of people on whom God can lavish with blessings, who God can teach to dispense these blessings to others. God will bless this group, this family, so that when the world sees them it will be clear how good and powerful God is. This family will be a bright spot in the middle of a sin stained world. They will learn from God how to spread their brightness just as far and fast as sin can travel. God will give the family a set of rules, the Law, and these rules will help them live in a way that will bless the world.

You may wonder why God doesn't just remove sin from the earth and get us back to Eden. After the flood, God is not too keen on removing things anymore. There was a lot of loss in the flood that God would rather not repeat. Sin has become so enmeshed in creation it would be hard to clean it up without losing creatures and people God loves. When sin came into the world it did not take hold of 100% of some things and 0% of others. We all have some sin in us and some good. To ask God to take sin out of the world like *that* (snaps finger)? Well we saw how that worked out in the Avenger movies. No, the solution must be an antidote to counteract the effects of sin, even as sin lives on and thrives.

The formula for that antidote is God's chosen family. God starts with Abraham and Sarah's family. It's small, just the two of them. They haven't been able to have kids yet, but God promises them they will start a great nation and their descendants will be as many as the stars in the sky. This is an incredible blessing for God to give. But that is the plan, to bless the family so they can spread blessings around the world. SO, it's a good idea to make sure this family grows!

God goes to Abraham and establishes the relationship. The exact reason why God chooses Abraham over every other human is not entirely clear, but I'll bet it has something to do with the way Abraham responds to God. When God asks Abraham to leave his home and go somewhere new, Abraham obeys. His willingness to trust God and be a good partner in this plan solidifies his place in God's family. Abraham is not perfect, he has sin in him too. He has moments where he distrusts God's promise to give him a son. But every time Abraham wanders, God reminds him of the promises and reaffirms God will continue to bless Abraham and his family so the family can bless the world. Abraham does have a son and his

family grows; God's family grows. Now because this family is blessed there are others who see them and want to be a part of that, and guess what? They can join the family. That is the beauty of a chosen family!

It also can get ugly when the family members don't agree on who can join. This problem pops up in our new testament reading. God's family is still going strong. It is even stronger since Jesus came to do some extra teaching and defeated death. The family plan is more or less still working. But since Jesus, more and more outsiders want to join the family. And some who were in the family have chosen to leave. There is a lot of confusion about who should be in and who should be out.

This is especially true in Rome. Paul writes to the church in Rome and uses a well-known practice of grafting one plant onto another to show how God's family works. (Read Romans 11: 17-24). Olive farmers would cultivate plants for the best output of olives. They picked plants for their size of fruit, flavor, and color. As they worked with the plants they would run into a common problem: a highly cultivated plant would stop growing olives all together. Plants produce fruit to survive. When a farmer tends to a plant's every need it can lose its survival instinct. Wild plants are in hyper survival mode and put a lot of energy towards producing fruit. When a cultivated plant stopped producing fruit the farmer could graft cultivated branches onto wild plants and jump start fruit production again. Paul compares this to God's family. If gentiles want to join the family, they will not only be welcomed but grafted onto the main trunk of the tree to receive the same blessing as everyone else. And if a branch no longer produces good fruit to bless the world then that branch will be cut away to make room for another producing branch.

Again, we see God's family receiving blessings, but also being expected to bless others, to produce fruit. Paul warns those who are receiving God's blessings to not look down their noses at fallen branches. Instead they should be in awe of how God's family works. Those who were outside the family can be integrated thoroughly into God's family. He also reminds them that just because someone does not believe now does not mean they will be rejected later. Even if a branch falls off, God can graft it back on at any time. And here is where I think God's family gets really compelling. Yes, we are blessed, but there are times we do not feel particularly blessed. Those hard times will come. But if God's family works like an olive tree it means we are allowed to have a bad season. When we aren't feeling the sun shining on our branch, the branches around us are still collecting the sun and turning it into food for the whole tree. If I am feeling wilted, I still get fed! I still can produce good fruit because of the nourishment of the trunk. There will be seasons where we feel like we are accepting more blessings than we are giving but it takes two to make a blessing work: one to give the blessing and one to receive it. Yes, we all want to be the giver, but the system doesn't work that way. You do your part in the family just as well when you are a recipient too. If I am in a down season, that does not make me any less a part of the family. What matters is a person's commitment to the call to be a blessing when the opportunity arises. And blessing others comes in a million forms. A smile, letting someone merge on the highway, sitting and listening to someone, playing with a child, these are all ways to be a blessing and no one is greater than the other. We may feel short on blessings but can still offer these things to others. Blessings are funny things too. The more you give, the more you have.

This week Forbes had a piece about giving back as a good business model. Scott Moorehead is a coauthor of [Build A Culture of Good: Unleash Results by Letting Your Employees Bring Their Soul to Work](#). In this book, Moorehead and his coauthors make a case for promoting philanthropy in the workplace. Moorehead is the CEO of his family business and started seeing employee turnover skyrocket. He discovered that most employees only saw the business as a paycheck and had not developed a deep sense of loyalty. Moorehead decided the solution would be to connect and give back to the community where the employees lived. This "culture of Good" as Moorehead calls it, has cause their employee turnover to become just half of what peer companies see in a year. And it's bringing new customers to the cash register. The more you give the more you have.

It seems God was onto something with choosing a family that would live their lives to bless others. Not only does that work help others, it makes for a better sense of self and belonging. It feels good to belong to a family that is committed to creating a culture of good. A family that will help each member be the best version of themselves and support each other through hard times. God's family wants a culture of good to take over the world and works every day to keep the ripple of blessing moving in the world.