

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, May 8, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Acts 16:16-34; Psalm 97; John 17:20-26**  
**“God's family”**

There are several ways to think about this particular Sunday.

This year, according to the Revised Common Lectionary and the way Easter falls in the western church, today is the seventh Sunday of the season of Easter and the first Sunday after the Ascension of our Lord.

In the word of Hallmark Cards, the second Sunday in May is Mother's Day, in North America at least. In the United Kingdom, Mother's Day falls on the fourth Sunday in Lent, which means that it was on March 6 this year.

In the world of the church in North America, maybe in an attempt to acknowledge the effect on the church of the increased secularisation of society, today is sometimes called Christian Family Sunday. Or in the words of my sermon title, the family of God.

A story I have probably shared with you before: a number of years ago, a colleague was talking with me about the congregation my colleague served. I knew that it had not been a particularly happy congregation for while, but it had become even less happy recently. People were squabbling and arguing, seemingly unable to agree or find a reasonable compromise on any number of things. One of my colleague's elders had just visited and had expressed frustration over the way people in the congregation were behaving: "What's wrong with those people? Can't they just get along? Don't they know we are supposed to be a family?" To which my colleague replied, "I don't know. They are behaving just the way my family usually behaves."

Strange and wonderful things, families. Every family has its weird uncle, its crazy aunt, its black sheep of the family, its problem child. Just think for a moment about your own family. If you can't identify at least one of these, or if you think your family doesn't have one, then I have news for you: you may be it.

The word family appears 18 times in the New Testament in the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible. 13 times it refers to a particular human family. These include the family of the king in Jesus' parable of the sheep; and the families of Jesus, David, the high-priest, Joseph, Abraham, the jailer in today's text from Acts, Aristobulus, and Narcissus.

There is also reference to family members in need, and family members able to care for family members in need, and to the importance of not offending your family.

Once, it is used in the phrase *every family in heaven and on earth*.

And four times, it refers to something other than the human family or families. (Matthew 25:40; Mark 3:21; Luke 2:4, 12:13; Acts 4:6, 7:13, 13:26; Romans 16:10, 16:11, 1 Corinthians 8:12;

Ephesians 3:15; I Timothy 5:4, 5.8)

In Romans 8:29, St Paul talks about those whom God foreknew being *predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family*. The exact nature and make-up of that large family are not specified.

Paul opens his letter to the Christians in Galatia by sending greetings from *all the members of God's family who are with me*. And he goes on to urge them whenever they have an opportunity to *work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith* Galatians 1:2, 6:10.

And finally, I Peter 2:17 urges the readers to love *the family of believers*.

Going by the small number of times the phrase crops up, it is reasonable to conclude that the concept of the family of God doesn't seem to be a particularly significant part of New Testament thought.

But there are a couple of concepts that are used in the New Testament that are worth pondering today. We see one of these in the phrase that Jesus uses repeatedly in today's Gospel lesson, his prayer for his followers on the night when he was betrayed: *that they may be one. ... that they may all be one* in John 17:21; *that they may be one, as we are one* in John 17:22; and *that they may become completely one* John 17:23. Not just that Jesus' followers be one: that they all be one, that they be completely one, and that they all be as completely one as the Father and the Son are one.

That's a pretty high standard for followers of Jesus to live up to. But when we are dealing with the things of God, and with what it means to be the people of God in the world today, we should only expect the standards to be high.

The other concept is the one that Paul uses a number of times, in I Corinthians, Ephesians, and Colossians – the concept that the followers of Jesus Christ form one body. As in the human body, there are many parts in this body. And each part has its own function. They do not all have the same function, but they are all equally essential for the health and well-being and proper functioning of the body. And if even one part of the body is missing or not functioning to its fullest capability, then the whole body is weakened, reduced, diminished.

But that is a matter for another day and another sermon. Today is a day to celebrate. For all of us, it's a day to celebrate Mother's Day.

For Jack's family and for Kalliope's family, it's a day to celebrate new life in their families.

For Jack's family, it's a day to celebrate his recovery from the medical problems he had and the procedures he has already been through in his short life.

For New St James, it's also a day to celebrate new life in our church family.

For God's family, the family of faith, the family of believers around the world and in heaven, it's a day to celebrate new life, and the faith that Jack's and Kalliope's parents are about to profess and

the commitment they are about to make on behalf of their children, and all that they hope and pray to see for their children.

It's a day when we come together on so many levels and celebrate being the large family of humanity and of God.

Another story to close that I have probably shared with you before. It's not about a human family. It's not about the family of New St James. It's not about God's family. But I believe that in all of these levels, we can learn something from it.

A number of years ago I conducted the funeral of a man who as an alcoholic. Through his friendship with Bill W and the work of Alcoholics Anonymous, he had been dry and sober for over 25 years, and had helped many others reach sobriety. At the funeral, his family asked his closest friend, whom he had helped through the 12 steps, to speak. He came to the front, and began with the words that were then the customary greeting at AA meetings: "Hi, my name is Jim. I am an alcoholic."

Most of the congregation gathered there responded immediately with the customary AA response, "Hi, Jim." I remember thinking to myself that I don't know how that made Jim feel, but it made me feel as if everyone there had just accepted him and welcomed him and stretched out their arms and embraced him.

Maybe that's what real family is all about.