

Reflections on Being Family

2nd Corinthians 13:11-13

CWZepp, BWCOB, May 18, 2008

From the conclusion of the 2nd letter to the Corinthians:

Finally brothers and sisters, farewell. Put things in order, listen to my appeal, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you. Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the saints greet you. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.

One of the distinctive marks of the early Brethren was that they took the instruction in these verses, and others like them throughout the New Testament, at face value. So that when they read the words from St. Paul, "Greet one another with a holy kiss...", they assumed that as followers of Christ, they ought to literally greet one another with a holy kiss. So on that basis, the Brethren used the holy kiss – also called the kiss of charity and the Christian salutation – as a form of greeting. It would be exchanged on the lips between members of the same gender whenever the Brethren gathered for worship and was usually accompanied by a handshake – the "right hand of Christian fellowship." But it had a place of a special importance in the celebration of Love Feast.

I don't recall learning about this piece of Brethren tradition prior to my first Love Feast. Perhaps we had talked about it in Sunday School and it had fallen on uninterested ears. But you can imagine my surprise when I discovered that it is still practiced by some of the elder members of our denomination during the service of footwashing. It is awkward enough for a pre-pubescent boy to be sitting among mostly grown men washing one another's feet. But for a virtual stranger to finish washing my feet and then stand up and attempt to plant a kiss on my quickly turning cheek – that was just too much for this Brethren rookie. Somehow, that first Love Feast still made an overall favorable impression on me.

Today, the exchange of the holy kiss is a rarity among Brethren, existing for the most part only as an awkward relic preserved among those few who continue to practice it at Love Feast. But while the sacred smooching passed out of favor among Brethren in the twentieth century and beyond, I believe that the underlying sentiment behind the holy kiss remains as strong and as vital as ever among most Brethren. And that underlying sentiment is that we are all family.

In the cultural context underlying the New Testament, the kiss was a way of greeting family. So when Christians were instructed to greet one another with a holy kiss, what they were really being asked to do was to greet one another as family. It was a way to create an Olive Garden like atmosphere in the church – you know, a way to say, "when you're here, you're family." But in our culture today, while kisses are still exchanged between family members, especially with children, they are much more associated with romantic love. Thus the awkwardness I felt in that first Love Feast encounter, and in several similar instances since. For me, as a 29 year old white male living in the 21st century western world, the holy kiss would neither arise from, nor inspire feelings of brotherly love with my fellow Christian brothers. Quite the opposite,

because it feels inappropriate in our context, it makes me want to pull back and perhaps even avoid situations where it might happen again.

So it is no great wonder that the practice fell out of favor with the Brethren in the last century. But its widespread demise in our faith tradition has opened a question that we need to consider if we do indeed want to keep alive the sentiment that we are all family. If not the kiss: then what? How do we communicate to one another – and to others – what the holy kiss once communicated among the early Brethren and the early Christians to whom the New Testament letters were written?

Some have suggested that the handshake – the so called “right hand of Christian fellowship”, which was generally practiced along with the holy kiss – is a suitable alternative. But while we have all probably felt the warmth and love of a good hearty handshake from a friend or loved one, handshakes are also exchanged among virtual strangers in a business-like or routine way. So while they certainly do no harm and are much less awkward than a kiss in today’s world, they also don’t carry that sense of special and close family relationship.

Another possibility that has been suggested and widely adopted is the holy hug. In fact, some modern biblical paraphrases such as Eugene Peterson’s Message Bible translate the New Testament passages that refer to the holy kiss as a “holy embrace”. This surely comes much closer to communicating the intended family sentiment, as well as the warmth and love that go with it. When I was in college, one of the well-worn inside jokes among my group of friends was to offer your hand to another guy, who would respond, “Brothers don’t shake, man. Brothers hug” and then give you a big bear hug. The fraternal spirit behind that repeated gesture is, in my mind, much the same as what probably lay behind the holy kiss.

But regardless of what we might say is a suitable alternative to the holy kiss, I believe that one part of our Brethren heritage that is worth holding onto is the tradition – and the theology – of being family. To be sisters and brothers to one another – and to Christ – is the very essence of what it means to be Brethren – a conviction enshrined in our very name. We are not merely individuals who come together every week or so to worship a common God. We are family by virtue of being adopted into the family of God. We are bound together by the vows we take at our baptism and/or when we join the church. While most Christian faith traditions would probably also affirm these convictions, the Brethren have in large part defined themselves by them. From addressing one another as “Brother” and “Sister” to greeting one another with a holy kiss, the Brethren have made being family a central part of being followers of Christ.

But what exactly does it mean for Brethren today to be family? In a time when the concept of family is itself being questioned and stretched and challenged to fit into new realities, possibilities, and social patterns, what does it mean for us to say that we are sisters and brothers in Christ’s family? I have no answers and no easy definition for family to give you. But I will offer you seven characteristics that arose from my own reflections on being family. These characteristics, I believe, are true for families whether they are our families of origin, the families we have created, or our family of faith.

The first is that families spend time together. It is not always quality time, and it is not always fun, but it often is both. Families eat together, play together, and work together. When extended families are separated by distance, they make an effort to come together at regular times for holidays, celebrations, and family reunions. The same is true of the family of faith.

As a congregational family, we spend time together in a variety of ways, from worship and fellowship meals to church league softball (go team!) and commission meetings. And we make efforts to connect with our extended family of faith through district activities and annual conferences, disaster response ministries and workcamps, and ecumenical events. Just like with other types of family, the time we spend together is not always fun and might not even be considered quality time. But it is time spent, in a word – together.

A second characteristic of being family is that families care for one another – sharing each others joys and sorrows – and helping each other to get through the tough times that come in every life. Come what may – families stick together and help one another out. From bringing meals to new parents, to helping out with chores or housework when someone gets laid up with illness or injury, to taking care of sick children so mom and dad don't have to miss work, to just being there to lean on and cry with in times of loss or tragedy – the family of faith expresses care for one another in so many ways.

A third characteristic is that you can be your true self around your family. There are no pretensions, no need to impress those who are bound together by family ties. Likewise in the church, at least when we are at our best. Our family of faith should be a safe place – a place where we can be silly and make a fool of ourselves with on occasion. As well as a safe place to ask serious questions that might be embarrassing or lead to judgment in other settings. We know we can be vulnerable with our family – because at the end of the day, they are still our family.

A fourth characteristic is like the third – and that is that within a family, everyone is unique and fills a role that only they can fill. No one is dispensable – every single person is important. If the church were merely an organization, or an institution, then losses would not be so costly, because you could find someone else with similar or better skills, traits, or personality to take their place. But in a family, and also in a faith family – each person is valued not for what they do, but for who they are. And as no two people are alike, each and every person is precious and has something that only they can contribute to the good of the whole. And when the family loses one of its members – it hurts.

A fifth characteristic of being family is that membership comes with some expectations. What one member of a family does reflects on all the other members of the family. Each individual member carries the honor and reputation of their family with them, for good or for ill. Such is certainly true with the family of faith, often more so than we'd care to admit.

A sixth characteristic of family is that you don't get to pick and choose whom you are related to. Even in the families we create – when we choose a life partner or have or adopt children – there are webs of relationships that are far beyond our control. We may love our spouse, but if given the choice, we would choose a different set of in-laws. Or we may find that children, despite all the love and care given to them, grow up and make bad choices and cause us more grief than pride. But the fact of the matter is that once you become family, you have to learn to live with and respect, or at the very least tolerate, all the members of the family – not just the ones you like or agree with. I admit, within the family of faith, as well as with any family, this one can be an especially hard.

As is the seventh characteristic – love. Ask most people what defines a family, and this is probably the most frequent answer you will get. To be a family is to be bound together in love.

Jesus said that everyone would know who his disciples were by their love for one another. And this love is not a feeling that comes and goes – a fleeting emotional high that comes and goes willy-nilly on its own. No the love Jesus is talking about, and upon which families are best founded, is the kind of love that is forged by an act of the will – a decision to irrevocably bind your heart to another.

These are my own seven characteristics of being family. You may have others you would add to the list, or some that you think should be stricken from mine. But again, I return to the question: what does all this mean for us? If we agree that being a true family of faith is of essential importance for Brethren (if not for all Christians), and if we agree that being family is made manifest in any number of characteristics, then I would suggest that one of the things we ought to be doing is evaluating our life together within our own family of faith in light of these characteristics.

One example of how our Brethren ancestors evaluated their life together and wrestled with questions of being family came out of the practice of giving the Holy Kiss between members of different races. When the question came to Annual Meeting in 1835 about how to receive “colored people” into the church – the answer given was simple: “make no difference on account of color.” However, in that same year, when the question came regarding what to do with those white members who refused to exchange the holy kiss with black members, the answer affirmed that the higher way was to practice that love which makes no distinction in race, but it also urged African American members to “bear with that weakness” and not “offer the kiss to such weak members until they become stronger and make the first offer.”

Such questions were important to the life of the Brethren in the mid-18th century, in large part because they were connected with questions of being family. Could they welcome people of other races into their family of faith? If so, would they and could they offer the sign and symbol that showed that welcome was authentic? And what about those who personally were not willing to go as far as the majority, and who couldn’t bring themselves to offer the kiss to someone of another race? Should they be excluded from the family of faith because they wouldn’t welcome others?

Today our issues of being family are different, but in many ways they are also the same. How do our practices and habits and ways of doing things in this congregation reinforce – or undermine – the sentiment that we are all family? Do we spend enough quality time together? How do we express our care for one another in good times and bad? How well do we communicate to one another that this is a safe place to be yourself? Does everyone feel that they have a valuable, vital, and unique role to play in the family? How well do we communicate the expectations we have for members of our family? And how well do we abide with and tolerate those family members with whom we disagree or whom we frankly just don’t care for. And finally, when other people look at us from the outside, can they tell that we are bound together by love?

One of the things the holy kiss did, if nothing else, was to make the Brethren over the years wrestle with exactly what it meant to be family. I wonder what causes us to wrestle with that question today? Any ideas?

Prayers For Families

God of our lives, you have created us for relationship with one another, and one of the main ways we think about our relationships is in terms of family. And so today, Lord, we remember and offer special prayers for the families in our lives.

We give you thanks for the families of our origin. Though they were never perfect, they made each of us who we are, and we give you thanks for the good memories most of us have with the families who give us life and raised us. But where relationships with parents were or are strained, or where they cease to exist, Lord, we ask for your grace. Where sibling rivalry or conflict has led to brokenness, we ask for your healing and forgiveness. Where there are histories and patterns of violence and strife, we seek your aid and your peace. Where neglect and apathy have left children feeling unloved and unlovable, we ask your blessing and compassion. Where families have been pushed to the limit by poverty and lack of security, we ask for your mercy.

And Lord, we give you thanks and seek your blessing for all those who struggle to be family in less than ideal circumstances. For grandparents who find themselves raising their grandchildren. For single parents who are trying to balance providing for their family, spending time with their family, and having enough time for themselves. For those who have wished to have children and could not. For those who have adopted children, and those who open their homes to children in need of foster care. For those whose lives revolve around caring for a family member who is sick, or dying, or handicapped. For those whose families are destabilized or torn apart by tours of military duty. For those who grieve the loss of a parent or child or sibling. For those who are separated by political policies and social turmoil. For those who are refugees from their home. For those who struggle through economic woes and tragedy of various sorts. For those who want desperately to achieve legal status and social recognition. We lift all these up to you Lord, and we ask your blessing, your mercy, your peace, and most importantly, your love and care.

O God, we also raise to you those families who are just starting out. All those who are just now learning what it means to be family. For the challenges of learning to love and live with less-than-perfect in-laws. For the stresses of increased demands and frustrated expectations. For the time constraints felt by new additions. For the stretching of our imaginations on what constitutes family. For all these Lord, we also seek your blessing and grace, love and care.

God we also lift up our family of faith to you. Help us to truly be family to one another, and to show your love through our love for one another. Forgive us where we fail, and guide us when we need direction. Give us wisdom to know and courage, strength, and patience to be what it takes to truly be a sacred family. And help our life together as a family of faith undergird, support, encourage, and bless the life of the families that make up our body.

And finally today, Lord, we remember the members of our human family who are suffering right now Lord, whether close to home or far away. We think especially of our brothers and sisters in China and Myanmar, who are feeling the immense losses of natural disasters, and the unimaginable tragedy of lives and homes destroyed. But Lord we also think of those who suffer at the hands of less dramatic and newsworthy tragedies, and we lift all of these sisters and brothers in need and heartache to you this morning in a special way. Show us how we can better love and care for our larger human family. For we are all bound together as your children...children whom you have created and people for whom Christ was willing to die. For families of all stripes and circumstances, for our family of faith and for all families of all faiths, and for the family of people who share this earth as our common home – we pray this day in the name of Jesus Christ, our brother – Amen