

Living as a Spiritual Family
1 Timothy 3:15

As we've refined our plans for this phase of Making Room, we've become convinced that the building addition we've planned should help facilitate deeper relationships here at Faith: relationships among adults, among youth, and between youth and adults. The value that most clearly expresses the importance of relationships is "authentic community":

God created us to live in community with one another. We seek to cultivate deep spiritual friendships and other healthy relationships of accountability, belonging, and care.

You don't have to have a church building to have "deep spiritual friendships" and other "healthy relationships" in the church. But many times these relationships begin in the context of gatherings that happen at a church building. That is our desire for this Making Room effort.

We are taking four weeks to talk about authentic community. Specifically we are going to consider some of the dominant images of the church given in the New Testament: the household of God, the body of Christ, and a Royal Priesthood. These images should inform the way we think about relationships in the church.

For over 30 years my three brothers and I have struck a pose and taken a photo whenever we've been together. A few years ago we started taking an annual "brothers' trip" each summer. Last summer we went to Denver and took this photo:

[Ratliff Brothers Photo]

Yes, I had matching tee shirts made. When we started having kids, we added the title "uncle" to each of our names. So, from right to left you're looking at Uncle Mikey, Uncle Jeffy, Uncle Stevie, and Uncle Tommy. My three brothers and I love each other; we're really pretty good friends. One reason we get along so well is that Mikey lives almost a thousand miles away (in Mississippi); Jeffy lives 8700 miles away in Vietnam, and Tommy lives 1500 miles away in Boston. We don't make hard decisions together; we don't budget; we don't see each other at our worst. We mainly take a vacation together once a year. Things were very different 40 years ago when we all lived under the same roof!

I share all of this because the church is likened to a family or a household in the New Testament. In the church we aren't on vacation together. We live our lives together - including hard decisions, budgets, priorities, etc. We see each other at our worst. Therefore we shouldn't be surprised if relationships in the church are difficult and if they require hard work. We shouldn't be surprised that we sometimes feel like giving up and dropping out.

This morning we are going to consider a couple of passages that describe the church as a family/household. Since our Making Room effort primarily addresses the need for healthy relationships between and among youth and adults, I will be discussing how the church as the household of God should inform these relationships. In other words, all of us - whether youth or adults - need to think of ourselves rightly in relation to each other.

Passage #1: In Matthew 12 we have an account that introduces the idea of ***The family of Jesus***. (Matthew 12:46-50)

46 While He was still speaking to the crowds, behold, His mother and brothers were standing outside, seeking to speak to Him. 47 Someone said to Him, "Behold, Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside seeking to speak to You." 48 But Jesus answered the one who was telling Him and said, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" 49 And stretching out His hand toward His disciples, He said, "Behold My mother and My brothers! 50 "For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Jesus wasn't trying to be mean to His mother (Mary) and His half brothers; He wasn't looking for an occasion to offend or "dishonor" His biological family. Rather, Jesus took the opportunity to communicate a perspective to His disciples that was critical for them to understand. Jesus asks the question, "Who is My mother and who are My brothers?" In other words, "Where do I really 'belong'? Who is my true family?"

Jesus answered the question by stretching His hand toward His disciples/followers and saying,

49 . . . "Behold My mother and My brothers! 50 "For whoever does the will of My Father who is in heaven, he is My brother and sister and mother."

Jesus – whose entire life was devoted to "the will of His Father" – is really at home among those who ***also*** do the will of His Father. This reality is obvious when we stop to think about it: if you and I have the same Father and are devoted to His will, we're family. Whether we realize it or not, whether we want it or not, we're family.

Here at Faith, we need to remember what Jesus says here: the thing that binds us together as a family is our common commitment to doing the will of God. Unless we're all seeking to do the will of God, any talk of living together as a family is just a cliché. Unless we are relating to God as a heavenly Father, seeking to do what He wants, we'll never experience our identity as the family of God.

Peter, James, John, and Paul pick up this concept in their writings and flesh out what it means to live together as the family of God. They will stress that we are supposed to think about the church as a family and treat each other as family (a ***healthy*** family). In other words, we should have the ***concern for*** and ***commitment to*** one another.

Not everyone enters into the church with this mentality and this expectation. You might have shown up this morning thinking, "I just wanted to go to the church building for an

hour of so, sing some songs, hear a message, and then leave. But I show up and they're talking about being a family! That's a little more than I was counting on." Or you may be thinking, "I've already got a good family; I don't need another one." Or you may be thinking, "I'm not all that crazy about the family I'm a part of already, so why would I want to be part of **another** family?" I simply want to acknowledge that the idea of the local church being "the family of God" may scare you or turn you off. In many cases, that's understandable. This identity is something that some people need to grow into.

Others, however, enter into the local church with great expectations about living their lives with others in the family of God. Some of us here long for the type of relationships that characterize a good, healthy family. Some people have never experienced this and want to. Some have experienced this and want more of it.

In order to understand more clearly the type of family that Jesus had in mind, let's turn to Paul's first letter to Timothy. There Paul explicitly develops the idea of the local church as the "household of God."

Passage #2: ***The "household of God."*** (1 Timothy 3:14-15) Let's read these verses and then we'll pick up the context.

14 I am writing these things to you, hoping to come to you before long; 15 but in case I am delayed, I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

Paul was currently in prison (probably in Rome) when he wrote this letter to Timothy who was a leader in the church in Ephesus. But in case Paul was delayed for any length of time, he wrote his letter to Timothy to explain "how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God."

In calling the church the "household of God" Paul was emphasizing how the local church consists of a network of relationships. A household in the Roman Empire would have included multiple generations as well as household servants and/or slaves. A household was a network of complex relationships. Paul wrote his letter to Timothy to explain how the "household of God" was to conduct itself. If you read 1 Timothy you will see that Paul addresses various household issues:

In chapter 3 Paul teaches that elders and deacons should be people who manage their own households well (1 Timothy 3:4, 12). Paul asks the question of elders, "If a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?" (1 Timothy 3:5) The family is the proving/training ground for elders in the household of God. The skills and mindset needed for leading an individual family are necessary for leading the household of God.

In chapter 5 Paul uses family terminology to explain how older and younger men and women should relate to each other in the household of God, especially in the context of conflict.

1 Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, 2 the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity.

Paul is saying that a church should deal with conflict the way a healthy family does. If your father, for example, has offended you, you don't "sharply rebuke him"; rather, you appeal to him. That's the way Timothy, a younger man at the time, should approach an older man, the way he would his own father. He shouldn't treat younger men as children, but as brothers; older women were treated as mothers and younger women as sisters (in all purity, of course). Paul is telling Timothy to think of the church in terms of family relationships - fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters. Doing so will give Timothy wisdom in dealing with conflict.

If you grew up in a healthy family that dealt with conflict in a healthy way, this is probably pretty intuitive for you. A conflict wasn't a crisis; conflict was a normal part of family life; you resolved conflicts and moved forward.

But most of us weren't raised in healthy families. Some of you grew up in families that ignored conflicts; you just learned to live with unresolved relationships. You bring that attitude into the church, thinking that strained and/or broken relationships are normal. Some of you grew up in volatile families; when there was a conflict you yelled and screamed at each other under the banner of "being honest and open" with each other. And you bring that mindset to conflict in the church.

That's why Paul wrote and instructed Timothy how one ought to conduct himself in the **household of God**. In God's household we need to learn healthy patterns of relating to each other so that we are a healthy family.

Notice back in 1 Timothy 3:15 what is at stake when it comes to our conduct at the household of God:

15 . . . I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

We are "the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." First, we belong to the one, true living God. Our conduct is supposed to reflect the character of God. We are supposed to treat each other the way God in Christ has treated us. In our relationships, we are supposed to be slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness and compassion. If somebody sent spies into our midst, they should conclude, "My how they love each other!"

Second, we are "the pillar and support of the truth." The image is that if we fall, the truth comes tumbling down with us. There is a sense in which the truth will always remain the truth. But in this world, the truth is mediated through the church. If we don't hold up the truth through our behavior and through our relationships with one another, we've failed

in our mission as a church. God's reputation and God's truth rise or fall based on how we conduct ourselves in His family.

The point of this imagery is that we need to live as a healthy household of God, a healthy family of Jesus. In the next few minutes I want to talk about some implications for youth and for adults. Building a new building and renovating existing space is useless unless we are living as a healthy household of God. I'd like to speak first to adults (age 18 and older) and then to youth (high school students).

Adults. I think it's worth acknowledging that many of us didn't grow up in healthy families or in healthy churches. I'm not suggesting that we should trash the people who raised us (in our families or in our churches). But I am suggesting that living as a spiritual family is not intuitive for many of us; we are figuring it out as we go. It's a messy process because we all bring out insecurities and dysfunctions to the church.

I can't state it strongly enough: It is worth it to do the hard work of learning to live as a healthy spiritual family. First of all, there are other adults about your age who need good **brothers and sisters** in the fullest spiritual sense. My challenge to you is to be the brother or sister you want others to be to you.

As you've heard, we have modified our thinking about MR2 significantly because we have become convinced (by your input/feedback) that we need more opportunities for adults to develop authentic community, relationships that are life-giving and nourishing. Half of our new building and most of our existing north wing will be used for classes for adults on Sunday morning. This isn't "daycare for adults"; we want these classes to provide serious content as well as opportunity to develop relationships with other adults.

Second, there are people younger than you who need spiritual **mothers and fathers** to help them negotiate this life. This will look different for different ones of us. When our daughters were in college, I developed "the talk" I would have the young men who were interested in them. I didn't try to intimidate these guys; I mainly wanted to let them know that I loved my daughters more than they did and wanted to challenge them to respect them physically and emotionally. I got pretty good at giving that talk. Over the years as I have talked with young women in the church, I've offered, "I've got this talk. . . if you ever have a guy who's interested in you, I'd be glad to meet with him and give him the perspective I gave the guys who were interested in my daughters."

I would urge you to keep your eyes open for ways that you can invest in those who are younger in the body of Christ, including our youth.

As we've said many times before, our children and youth don't need to see perfection; they need to see redemption. They need to see how redeemed people confess their sins to one another, humble themselves before each other, bear one another's burdens, and pray for one another. They need to see us loving each other so that they will know intuitively what the Bible is talking about when it talks about the church as a spiritual family.

Youth. When I was in high school I was a goofball. I didn't have a single healthy spiritual relationship with anybody else; I didn't have spiritual-minded friends and I didn't have spiritual relationships with adults. I went to church, but I didn't have any experience living in a spiritual family with fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters. Not surprisingly, my first year and a half of college were a wasteland.

On behalf of the rest of the church, I want you to know that we want so much more for you. We want you to grow up loving the church. We want you to have strong spiritual relationships with each other. And we want you to have strong spiritual relationships with those who are older than you; these people could be those who are already involved in high school ministry or others.

I've got a friend (who's in college now) who told me that beginning in high school there have been times when he has confessed his sins to his dad. Who does that?!?! When I was in high school I tried my best to hide my sins from my parents. [That's called "walking in darkness."] What type of person would even consider confessing his sins to his dad? Since middle school this young man has had honest, spiritual relationships with other kids and with grown-ups, including his dad. And so he is "walking in the light" - living his life in relationship with others who really want to do the will of God. He knows that he needs other people, both peers and those who are a bit ahead of him in his spiritual journey.

On behalf of everybody older than you, please know that we want to be good big brothers and big sisters in Christ. We want to be like spiritual moms and dads to you. Please take initiative and take risks in reaching out to us. We don't always know what you need or how to help you. But we want to learn. We want to grow as your spiritual family.

For one picture of how this might look, turn your eyes to the screen. Miah is 17-years-old and a senior in high school. Julie used to be 17 and in high school. . .

VIDEO (see live-stream or <https://vimeo.com/235112459/05393e30f2>)