

I saw a news story recently about a young lady having lunch on Sunday afternoon. The story was about the moment she left the Church. She was at a restaurant, and a group of ladies from her Church sat down—and she overheard most of their conversation.

It was full of grumbling about the pastor. They complained about the elders and musicians. They mocked the way certain people dressed. They revealed secrets—things they should have covered over. The whole conversation was full of gossip and vitriol and crude language.

And this was the very moment she decided never to go back to that Church or any Church. She said she still loved Jesus—but she didn't much care for the people called by His name.

I have heard various iterations of this story so many times. And I understand her reaction. I don't think it is a valid excuse to neglect the assembly of believers. It fails to recognize that we gather in the Church because we are sinners in need of forgiveness and the reformation of our lives. And that is what happens here—granted we have ears to hear. We come to receive the true medicine that heals our souls. The Church is full of people who are saints and sinners—all at the same time.

But some attention to our lives and conversations is a necessary step toward our spiritual maturity. Our lives and conversations should be full of grace. I like the way Paul says it in Ephesians 5, “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

Paul gives instructions to Timothy for his congregation in Ephesus in our reading tonight. I have never preached on this text. It doesn't occur in our lectionary. And it is a strangely specific text regarding the intersection of Church life and family life. Paul weaves them together in quite an interesting way. The details here are fascinating. And we won't have time to get into them all.

My outline for the sermon has four points. And it will go something like this. The Church is designed to be a **family**. We treat one another with respect and **honor** based on our God-given vocations. The role of **widows** in the Ephesian Church especially captures Paul's attention. And finally, we will conclude with some special instructions for **purity** of life.

The New Testament tells Christians to find their personal and family identity in Jesus Christ. The Christian life is what St. John says it is in John 1, “But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.” This means that all who belong to Christ are part of the same family.

Even though we are often quite different—we have different interests, vocations, hobbies, political ideas—in Holy Baptism, received in faith, we have been adopted into the family of God. In Ephesians 1, St. Paul says it this way, “In love he predestined us for adoption through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved.”

And now that God has made us His sons and daughters in Jesus Christ, the Church is the Christian's first family. We have obligations to one another just like we do with our actual relatives.

Now, it is perfectly fine for our relatives to join us in the Church family. In fact, this should be our highest goal for our relatives. We should pray for the spiritual welfare of our families. Our homes should be made holy by the Word of God and prayer. Everything should be managed according to the vocations that God has given us in the household. And our homes should be outposts for the Kingdom of God.

But Jesus also warns us that our faith can put us at odds with our own biological families. Now, this is not because of our sins—but because of our Savior. In Mark 3, as Jesus' brothers come to confront Him, they think He is out of His mind. They are opposed to the kingdom of God—at least at this point.

And in this context, Jesus asks His Disciples, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother." And so, we see that the family of God is our first identity.

As Paul writes to Timothy, the letter contains undertones of this identity. Paul calls Timothy, "my true child in the faith." The Ephesian Church members are referred to as his brothers and sisters. The Church itself is God's household. And so, we see the Church as a family, not a business. And as Paul writes, he addresses issues in the Church family at Ephesus.

And Paul's instructions begin with issues of respect and purity of heart. He says, "Do not rebuke an older man but encourage him as you would a father. Treat younger men like brothers, older women like mothers, younger women like sisters, in all purity." You can hear all the family language here.

Now, we live in a deeply casual culture. And we have very little respect for vocations of authority. We allow children to lead—and make every decision. And then we yell at them when they don't make the right ones. Everything is backwards.

We have been gradually working through the commandments and meanings this summer. We will turn to the explanations for the Creed next. We are reciting them in order. I didn't try to connect them with the readings. And so, it has been a few weeks since we heard the 4th Commandment. *Honor your father and your mother.*

In the Large Catechism, Luther deals with this commandment. I was tempted to include the whole article. But let me offer one simple quotation.

"Honor requires not only that parents be addressed kindly and with reverence, but also that, both in the heart and with the body, we demonstrate that we value them very highly, and that, next to God, we regard them as the very highest. For someone we honor from the heart we must also truly regard as high and great. We must, therefore, impress this truth upon the young that they should think of their parents as standing in God's place."

Now, honor in the family and in the Church does not give older members freedom to do as they please. As pastor, Timothy will need to correct his seniors. He cannot simply overlook their scandals or heresies. In fact, Paul has already instructed Timothy, "charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine."

But, instead of being harsh and combative with his elders, he should deal with them gently and tactfully—the way he would appeal to his own father or mother. The rebuke of an older member should be a reminder, not a reprimand.

And then we see that Timothy should see younger members as brothers and sisters. He should not look down—or talk down to them. They are his peers. There is wisdom in running the Church household in this way. And thus, honor, dignity, respect, and warmth are maintained in Church relationships. And this extends out to the whole congregation.

Now, Paul goes on at length with instructions for widows in the congregation. And this should tell us how much the Scriptures should guide our lives. The Greek word for *widow* here actually refers to any woman without a husband and the support of family.

And undoubtedly, the special emphasis on widows says something about the church in Ephesus. Widows were among the most vulnerable in the ancient world. Remember, there was no social security—no assisted living—no life insurance. And the Church was called to care for those without independent means.

But the first responsibility was for families to care for their own. Piety always begins at home. The faith must make it into our houses. Paul offers an overarching principle in verse 8, “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

Remember what the Large Catechism says about respect for parents—and this includes aging parents. And not only is family loyalty something children owe to their parents—it is a responsibility before God. Caring for our families is something pleasing in the sight of God. Paul wants to ensure that Christians glorify God in this particular way.

Any dereliction of this fundamental family duty is tantamount to a denial of Christ. This warning needs to be heard in our day, because we don’t live in the most compassionate of times. We hold grudges in our own families way too long. And this gives Christians a wonderful opportunity to shine with the love of Christ in the world.

But the attention to detail in these commands also says something important about God. God has a special place in His heart for single women in a culture that did not appreciate them.

Psalms 68 comes to mind, “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation. God settles the solitary in a home; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity.”

Some of the most touching stories in the Old Testament concern the care of widows. Think about Ruth and Naomi. God performed amazing miracles for widows through the Prophets Elijah and Elisha.

And then in the New Testament we remember the resurrection miracle of Jesus for the widow of Nain. Jesus commended the persistence of the praying widow—and the generosity of the poor woman who gave all that she had at the temple. We see Jesus rebuke those religious leaders who devour widows’ houses. We remember His care for His own widowed mother as He dies on the cross. We can clearly see a pattern here. Christ is compassionate and kind—especially to those rejected and neglected by the world. We should take great comfort in His concern. And we should learn from it.

Now, there is one more thing I would like you to notice. Although Paul gives attention to the role of family and Church in the lives of widows—rightly understood—he also has several instructions for widows themselves. He calls them to purity of life. For example, younger widows can marry. But if they marry, it should not be into a relationship that draws them away from Christ. She should marry in Christ.

But there are several other practices that Paul warns against. He warns against widows practicing “to be idlers, going about from house to house, and not only idlers, but also gossips and busybodies, saying what they should not.” Women who find themselves alone are not to be self-indulgent. They are not to be in everyone else’s business. They choose their words with wisdom and compassion. They are to have the reputation of good works and a rich spiritual life.

If she has children, she should bring them up in the fear of the Lord. She should practice hospitality. She should be a servant of the Gospel—here reminiscent of Jesus Himself washing the feet of the saints. Her life is directed away from herself—out to the good of others. She should be devoted to every good work.

I think—perhaps—Paul’s instructions here hold up Timothy’s own mother and grandmother as an example of the faith. In 2 Timothy 1, Paul says, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, dwells in you as well.” Their example will shape our hymn here in just a moment.

And I like the way St. John Chrysostom says it. And it applies not just to widows—but to us all. He says, “The Holy Scriptures do not know any distinctions. They enjoin that all lead the lives of monks.” He doesn’t mean that we all go off to the monastery. He means that we give ourselves to the Scriptures and prayer—we give ourselves to service and purity of living—we give ourselves to Christ—in all of life.

The Church is designed to be a family. And thus, we treat one another with respect and honor based on our God-given vocations. As we have seen, Paul gives special attention to the role of widows in the Ephesian Church. They are the most vulnerable in ancient Ephesus. Both family and Church family have obligations to care for their needs. But this doesn’t release them from their own responsibilities to Church and family. There is a purity of life that shapes their every moment.

In all of this, we must give ourselves over to Paul’s instructions. We should heed his warnings. This is God’s will for us. Paul is detailed and specific here. He cares about our conduct in the three estates—family, church, and community.

We have a rich theology of vocation in the Lutheran Church. How we treat one another matters. God cares how we live. And all is shaped by our gratefulness for His care and compassion in Jesus Christ. We are adopted into the family of God. And we find our identity and life in God’s family first. In the name of Jesus.

+Soli Deo Gloria+