

The Spiritual Family

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning to you. Yet again, welcome. We're really glad that you're here. For those keeping score at home, you may notice that we are not reading the lectionary readings this Sunday.

It's normative in our church now to follow the Sunday lectionary in the Book of Common Prayer, but we're going to take a break from that for the next three weeks because we want to take some time to share with you our vision for congregational care at Church of the Advent.

Care is something that we take very seriously. It's very close to the heart of not only the church, but this church, and it's one of our priorities. So we've been working on and plan to share with you a care plan. This is actually a written plan that will be distributed for everybody to see that we'll make available in a couple of weeks. But before we do that, we wanted to take some time to share with you our philosophy of care. How do we think about what it means to be a loving and caring congregation? Whether you've been a part of our church for years or this is your first Sunday, whether you are here as a longtime Christian or whether you're here as somebody who's not sure what you believe, we are committed to ensuring that every single member and regular attender at Church of the Advent is known, is loved, and is able to get care and support when needed.

And as our church grows, this is something that we have to be more and more and more intentional about if it's actually going to happen. And this isn't our idea. It's not unique to Church of the Advent.

This is the way we believe God actually designed the church to function. The gospel isn't limited to personal salvation and getting right with God. It includes the truth that God has established His church as a community of people who love one another and who serve one another. And we believe that the church is actually, and by the church I mean the church community, a gathering like this one, a community like this one, that the church is God's primary means of caring for and providing for His people.

[2 : 1 5] That when we pray and bring our needs to God, that very often God intends to meet those needs and answer those prayers through the community around us. And so we're going to be looking at these passages that we heard read from Matthew and Galatians, and we're going to see first the overarching truth, the kind of guiding idea that sits behind this entire way of thinking, and then we're going to look at a few implications of that. So let's pray and then we'll open God's Word together.

Lord, we thank You for Your Word, and we thank You for this work that You're doing in the world, this community that You're building through the power of Your Spirit and the presence of Your Son.

We pray that You would use Your Word to illuminate for us a path forward where this vision might be reality, where everyone here would be able to experience being loved, known, that they would feel that they belong, that even if they've just crossed the threshold for the first time this morning, Lord, that they would have a sense that this is a place where they can belong. And that's not just something that can be engineered. It has to happen through the power of Your Spirit. So that's what we ask this morning in Jesus' name. Amen. So first of all, the overarching truth that is guiding this conviction for us as a church, and that is this, that the church is a spiritual family. The church is a spiritual family. During Jesus' earthly ministry at one point, when He is teaching a group of people,

His mother and brothers come to see Him. We read about this. We heard Lisa read this in Matthew chapter 12. Someone comes to tell Jesus that His mother and brothers are outside, and they're waiting to speak with Him, but they can't get in because of the crowd. We would think that Jesus would respond by saying, oh, hold on one second. I'll be right back. I got to go talk to my mom. But that's not what He says.

Jesus spreads His hands out like this, and He says, who is my mother? And who are my brothers? And we realize that He's using this as a teaching moment. And then He stretches out His hands towards His disciples, and He says, here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother. Now, we need to understand that this is a culture where family was everything. Family was your entire identity. The greatest hope in life was to get married and to have a big family with lots of kids and to one day be able to pass all of your possessions down to the next generation. To not have a family was a death sentence. It meant you are nobody.

[5 : 16] So when Jesus says this, He's giving us a preview of a radical idea and a radical plan. And that is that He intends to recenter the locus of our identity away from the nuclear family. Doesn't mean the nuclear family is not important. It's very important. But He intends to recenter the locus of our identity away from the nuclear family and toward a new kind of family that God is establishing in the world, which is a spiritual family. It's a reorientation of identity and community. And unlike earthly families, which are intentionally and by design exclusive, this family that God is building in the world is radically inclusive. Anyone who puts their faith in Jesus, anyone who desires to have God as their father is welcomed into this family. You know, Rodney Stark, the historical sociologist, says that one of the main reasons the early church grew so quickly in Rome is because they took this very seriously.

They took in and cared for people who did not have a traditional nuclear family. People like widows, orphans, eunuchs, slaves, people who proper society would look at as outcasts, as people who were in some cases doomed because they didn't have a family. The Christians said, we will be your family.

That's why many of the debates, and you see some of this in places like the book of Acts or in Paul's instructions to Timothy, many of the issues they dealt with concerned, how do we make sure that we are providing equally and providing well for all of these people who are now looking to us to be family for them? Right? So it was a very practical reality. We will be your family.

So in our reading from Galatians, in Paul's letter to the Galatians, when Paul refers to Christians here as brothers and sisters, this is not just rhetoric. He's not just waxing poetic.

This is essential for understanding how relationships in the church are meant to function. When he says that, it's instructive. When you look at the person to your right and your left, that is your brother, that is your sister. So implications for Advent are manifold. We're going to be looking at this over the next couple of weeks. The question that we're going to be asking is, how do we live this out in practical terms? And that's really what this next three-week series is really about.

[8 : 02] This morning, we're just going to touch on kind of one major idea that's connected to being a spiritual family. And that is this, that being a spiritual family means we share the responsibility for living this out together. We share the responsibility for living this out together. Now, this is something that we talk about a lot with our kids. We say this to them from time to time. We all have responsibilities in the home. Right? We all have responsibilities. Not only do they do things for themselves, like clean up their room or make their bed or, you know, help pack their lunches for school, but they're also expected to do things that serve the whole family. They take out the trash.

They take out the recycling. They feed and care for the pets. They empty the dishwasher. And when they grumble about having to do these things, right, I didn't make that mess. You know, that's not my stuff.

Why do I have to help clean it up? We come back to the same point again and again and again. This is simply a part of what it means to be in a family. Or another way to put it would be this.

We share the responsibility for building the kind of home we all want to live in. We share the responsibility for building the kind of home that we all want to live in.

We don't want to live in a home that's always messed up and trashed. That means we all have to work to clean it up together, right? And it's the same principle that you see in operation in the spiritual family of the church. We share the responsibility for building the kind of church that we all want to live in.

[9 : 44] So what are some of the shared responsibilities in our spiritual family when it comes to the idea of congregational care? I want to share three with you. The first is this. We share a responsibility to ensure that everyone belongs in the family. We share a responsibility to ensure that everyone feels like they belong here in this spiritual family. Part of being in this church family is being intentional about building relationships with people outside of your demographic.

Could be people who are in a different life stage. It could be people who are a different age or a different race or a different even political orientation. When people become a part of our community, we should always be asking the question together, do they feel like they can belong here?

I'll give you one example of how this plays out. In the early years of our church, we were mostly made up of single people. And there were very few families who had kids. If you came into our church and you were young and single, you immediately fit right in. But when a few of us started having kids, we kind of felt like oddballs, you know. I remember going to parties and walking around and being the only one with a baby strapped to my chest. And I remember people would want to stay up late, you know, well past midnight and hang out and all that. And I just remember being tired all the time. I was always tired. I still feel that way, but this is when I began to feel that way. I was tired all the time.

And I remember just thinking, well, you know, if we want to fit in, we're just going to have to make it work. Because this is the primary demographic and this is when people hang out. And obviously, things have changed a bit, right? And now, I don't know if you've noticed, but we have a few more kids in our church family. And in this season of life, we happen to have a lot of families with young kids.

And that's a massive blessing. You know, eight years ago, it really wasn't like this. Probably eight years from now, there'll be a different array of demographics, right? But because of where we are, people who don't fit that demographic, people who aren't married, people who are married, but they don't have kids, maybe people who are struggling with infertility, people who are maybe empty nesters, people who don't fit that demographic are going to be far more likely to feel like they don't belong.

[12:18] They're going to come in and they're going to look around and they're going to immediately think, I'm not sure this is a community where I'm going to be able to fit in. They're going to be far more likely to feel like they are unseen, that their needs don't matter or don't matter as much.

That in order to be in a community like this, they're going to have to get comfortable living on the margin. And no one should feel that way in their own family. Right? Nobody should feel that way in their own family. Now, I don't think that anybody wants anyone else to feel this way. Right? Nobody wants that to be the case. But the point is this, unless we are all actively working against that, this will be the way some people experience this community.

So the path of least resistance is that this will be the case. And unless we are all actively committed to making it not the case, it will be the case. Families with kids, in other words, don't just hang out with other families with kids. Right? I know that you probably feel like you have zero margin. And it's probably for the most part true. But we do make time for things that we prioritize. You know, we make time for play dates. You know, we make time for soccer and baseball.

We make time for music lessons. We can make time, sometime a little bit of time, to prioritize building relationships with people outside of our demographic. We can do that if it's a high enough priority. Now, it does not have to be inviting people over for a fancy weeknight dinner. If you can pull that off, that's fantastic. But at our house, weeknights these days are absolute insanity. So it doesn't have to be that. Have brunch on Saturday while the kids watch cartoons. Have a picnic near a playground where your kids can play on the playground if the weather's nice. You know, arrange a grabbing lunch after church because we're all here already anyway.

You know, as Jeff Simpson said last year at a members meeting, be willing to invite people into the chaos. You know, it's okay to sit on the floor and eat takeout. It's not about the recipe, it's about the relationships, right, that you're building. Now, maybe you wouldn't do that with a coworker. Maybe you wouldn't do that with your boss. But we're talking about family. And that's the kind of thing that you would do with your family. And it's okay to be creative. You know, I love, you know, Jeff and Molly came to our kids' soccer game yesterday. That was so cool that they just, we got to hang out, watch our kids play soccer. That was amazing. Maybe you're wondering, wait, who's Molly? That's a great question. So, the point I want to make is, the point I want to make is this, it doesn't have to be fancy. To people who are not married, to people who don't have kids, nobody's hearing a word I'm saying right now.

[15:28] It's also perfectly fine for you to initiate. Okay, it's perfectly fine for you to initiate. Okay, if people, and let's get serious for a minute. If people have not reached out to you and invited you over, I know it's tempting to take that personally. Please don't take it personally.

I know for a fact that there are a lot of people who, in their hearts, would love to have you over. But the kind of zero margin, overwhelming nature of life with young kids means you have a lot of things that you intend to do, but it's so easy to forget to do them. And so, it's okay for you to say, hey, I would love to come over and hang out with you guys sometime. I don't know anybody who wouldn't want to hear that. Now, it may take a little while to get it on the calendar, but it's okay to initiate. I want you to know, if you're here and you don't fit that kind of primary demographic, you're, you know, and you feel like you're on the margins, I want you to know this.

We love you. We need you as a church. And this is your family too. And you belong here. Okay, this is the first thing. We share a responsibility to ensure everyone belongs. Number two, we share a responsibility to care for other members of the family. We share a responsibility for care. It has to be something that we all do together. You know, when it comes to providing care, our society has become increasingly reliant on experts. I think we tend to want to outsource the responsibility of caregiving to professionals such as doctors and nurses, counselors, spiritual directors, life coaches, and, you know, of course, clergy. Now, this is not to downplay the role of professional caregivers.

For those of us who are here who are in some professional caregiving capacity, chances are you do what you do because you love to help people and you love to serve people. I can speak for everybody on our pastoral team. We do what we do because we love to care for and serve and shepherd God's people.

This is what we feel called to do in our lives. It becomes a problem, though, when a church begins to think that care can only be found if you go to a professional. That's where it becomes an issue.

[17 : 47] And there are two main reasons why this is a problem. The first reason is theological, and the second reason is practical. The theological reason why this is problematic is that we believe that God has given spiritual gifts to every single person in this room. And because you are in relationship with Jesus, He's fulfilled His promise to fill you with His Holy Spirit, and with that comes spiritual gifts.

And we believe that God provides for His people through the gifts that He has given to people around them. If care is only seen as the work of professionals like counselors or clergy, we are actually missing a huge opportunity to put God's gifts into action.

We do believe in the priesthood of all believers, and we believe that part of what that means is that we are spiritually equipped to care for one another. Right? So that's the theological reason. There's also a practical reason why this becomes problematic. You may be familiar with Dunbar's rule of 150. Robin Dunbar is a British anthropologist. Dunbar and colleagues discovered that human beings are only really capable of having roughly 150 meaningful relationships within their social network. There's sort of a neurological ceiling to the amount of meaningful...you can have a lot of casual acquaintances, but in terms of meaningful relationships, it seems to sort of cap out around 150. And you see this across lots of different organizations. You see it in the average size of medieval European villages. You see it in the military.

You see it in communes. And of course, we see this play out in the church. And this has major implications, actually, for the church. In a church of less than 150 people, everyone is going to know most everyone else. You know, I went to a little storefront church for a while when I lived up in New England, and it was a church of about 30 people on any given Sunday. And you knew everybody. You knew everybody's business.

Everybody knew everything about everybody. It was like being in a, you know, just everybody was in everybody's business all the time. That's what it's like. Everyone in a church like that is going to know the pastor personally. And pastors are going to be able to provide direct care in most situations. And that's going to work. As a church grows, though, that's no longer the case, because you will still only be able to have meaningful relationships with up to about 150 people. And you're not always going to be able to have a close, meaningful relationship with all of the clergy. And, you know, research, interestingly, shows this to be true regardless of the church, regardless of the denomination, regardless of the quality of the programming, regardless of whether we might want this to be different. So, in a church like our church, Church of the Advent, you're simply not going to be able to have a meaningful relationship with everyone in this church.

[21 : 00] You know, roughly two-thirds of the congregation, you're probably not going to be able to have a meaningful relationship with. And that's something to be aware of, and it's totally okay.

Despite our best efforts, you're not going to probably be able to have a meaningful relationship with all of the members of our pastoral team. But that's why we generally try to add a new clergy person roughly around, you know, every 150 or so people. Every 120 to 150 members and regular attenders that we gain, we try to make sure we're adding a new member of the clergy for this very reason. Now, what does this mean for us? I mean, how should we think about this? You know, some would hear this and say, well, this means that obviously we just need to all go to a small church of less than 150, and that would solve the problem. And, you know, listen, there are a lot of great advantages to being a smaller church. And yet, when we look, there are actually a lot of pros and cons, strengths and weaknesses to every size of church, right?

You just swap out one set of challenges for another set of challenges. There are also advantages to being a kind of mid-sized church or a larger church. And here's the thing with going to a smaller church.

If you are going to a smaller church, and it's healthy, and it's reaching people, and there's gospel ministry happening, it's probably going to grow. And so, as the church grows, the important thing is to not live in denial of this reality, but rather to anticipate it and then to be willing to shift accordingly. So, as a church grows, the role of both the congregation and clergy have to adjust accordingly. All right, so as a church grows beyond that threshold, the clergy, that priests and deacons, begin to focus more and more on identifying and training lay leaders and shepherds to share in the work of care and ministry. And this is exactly in line with what we see in Scripture. Ephesians chapter 4 verses 11 to 16, 11 to 16 teaches that God has given the church, pastors and other leaders, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, which is the building up of the body of Christ.

So, this becomes the focus, identifying and, as we call it, shoulder-tapping potential leaders, and then positioning them in places where they can begin to provide care for other people. So, likewise, the role of the congregation increasingly becomes sharing in the work of direct caregiving.

[23 : 43] So, we begin to rely on leaders. We begin to, in some cases, if there's a particular situation, we will form a care team around that person or around that couple. And a lot of the direct care happens through that care team. So, this includes core groups. This includes discipleship groups and discipleship leaders. This includes our catechists and our Sunday school teachers. This includes all of our ministry heads. This includes our Eucharistic prayer ministry, our intercessory prayer team, our healing prayer ministry. In all of these cases, you see us trying to identify and equip other people in the congregation to provide some of that direct care. And so, in a church our size, the majority of direct care should be provided by lay leaders and shepherds if we're operating the way we should be operating. So, this is why it is absolutely crucial if you're a part of our church, and if you're here for the first time, I'm really glad that you're here to hear this. It's incredibly important that you find ways to get involved outside of the Sunday service. We all need to be here. This is the center of our spiritual life together. But you really need to find other ways. Serve on a volunteer team.

Join the greeting team. Help downstairs with the kids. Find ways, avenues in. Come to Sunday school. Take foundations. Join a small group, right? Figure out a way to serve. Figure out a way to a group that you could be a part of where you could begin to build relationships where some of that care can start to happen. Again, I just want to reiterate, pastors do what we do because we love to shepherd people.

And there are plenty of situations where a pastor or a counselor or a psychiatrist or other professionals should absolutely be involved. The expectation is not that you all go out and become clinical counselors.

But don't overlook the ways that God might provide for people through you. And don't overlook the ways that God might provide for you through other people. So, before you go to a professional, have you let your small group know what's going on? Have you had a conversation with your small group leader or your ministry head and let them know what's going on and ask them to pray for you?

Have you reached out to our prayer ministry? Because anybody who wants to, you can reach out to our healing prayer ministry. And you can ask. And they would love to, a couple of them will come and they will meet with you and they will pray with you. And they will enter into that journey with you of intercession and seeking the Spirit. And that's, I think, should be that kind of, you know, have you spent time in prayer about this with other people in this community? Right? So, we all share in the responsibility of caring for one another. That's the second shared responsibility. Number three, the last one, last point for today. We share a responsibility to build healthy relationships within the family.

[26 : 42] So, we share a relationship to ensure everyone belongs, a responsibility to ensure everyone belongs. We share a responsibility to care for one another. And we finally, we share in the responsibility to build healthy relationships within the family. Now, what's this all about? Well, everyone who comes into the spiritual family, guess what? They're coming from a nuclear family.

Right? We all have our family of origin. And what happens in a family of origin? Well, we tend to import things from that family system into this family system. Right? And you might think that you're too enlightened to do that. But let me just pull back that veil. You're not. We all do it.

It's unconscious. We bring our habits. We bring our assumptions. We bring our communication styles. We bring our conflict styles. We bring our unmet needs. We bring our fears. We bring our childhood wounds. We bring all of that into...from our family of origin into the church family. So, what does this mean? Well, it means that, you know, some people come from families that are highly enmeshed, where everybody's in everybody's business all the time, and everybody's responsible for everybody else's emotional well-being.

And they think that's normal. And they come into a church, and they expect that a loving church church is going to look like that. A loving church is going to look like that. A loving church