
Father Against Son, And Daughter Against Mother, On Homecoming Sunday

A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler
Atlanta, Georgia
Homecoming Sunday

*Father against son and son against father,
Mother against daughter and daughter against mother,
Mother-in-law against daughter-in-law
And daughter-in-law against mother-in-law? (Luke 12.53)*

I have been away for a while, and I am thrilled to be back at the Cathedral, back at this Eucharist, back in this community, and back in this pulpit. Today is Homecoming Sunday, and many of us are back home from summer times away. Welcome back home!

I was not originally scheduled to preach today. But the word is that my staff, my faithful and wonderfully talented staff, took a look at the gospel lessons for today, and decided it was I who should address this text on Homecoming Sunday.

Did you hear what Jesus said about father against son? Daughter against mother? Daughter-in-law against mother-in-law?

Why is it that Jesus says these things right when we are celebrating Holy Baptism, right when we have invited all our family to this sacred event, and when everyone really does want to get along well together? Why does Jesus say these things just after many of us have been on vacation with families, or about to spend Labor Day weekend with close family and friends?

Father against son? Daughter against mother? Daughter-in-law against mother-in-law? Well, actually that last image, That's the only one that really does make sense!

Many of us have enjoyed summer times with family. Some of those moments were light and easy, relaxed and loving. And some of those moments with family were nightmares! Tense and anxious, even angry. I have an old cousin who was speaking of oxymorons (you know; an oxymoron is a familiar phrase whose two terms actually contradict one another.) His favorite oxymoron, he said, is "family vacation."

God sets most of us in families, and that is generally a good thing. Even when our families disagree, and when our sisters and brothers collide with one another, even that can be ultimately a good thing. For if there is no disagreement, if we have no conflict, then we have no opportunity to express authentic identity, no opportunity to grow, no opportunity for resolution, and thus -- no opportunity for that most Christian of behaviors, the behavior of forgiveness.

Jesus does set us over against one another. Jesus sets us over against one another so that we can grow up! Father against son can actually be the way fathers become fathers and sons become sons.

Families are definitely special gifts of God. But, as with every good thing that God gives us, our human temptation is to

worship it so much that it becomes an idol. Any good gift that God gives us can become an idol when we forget the giver. Our possessions become idols. Our love of nature can become an idol. Our money, which can certainly be used for good, becomes an idol when the craving for it begins to control us.

And even families can become idols. Our image of the delightful, two-child, two-cars-in-the-garage, one-parent-at-home family, can become an idol. Any idealistic image of the perfect family -whatever its particulars are"" can become an idol when it does not allow us to see God in a new and pioneering and grace-giving way.

These words of Jesus are reminders that even the most cherished of our cultural goods do not fully express the grand and mysterious character of a relationship with God. Maybe even peace can become an idol if it is a false peace.

I love all these families here today. I love the families who worship together every week. I even love the families with conflict and antagonism. In fact, I do not believe there is ever a family without conflict and disagreement. I do not believe such families exist. "Mother against daughter" and "son against father" are how healthy families grow strong together.

"Mother against daughter" creates women. "Son against father" creates men. These are families whose conflict and disagreement lead them into grace and new life and renewed relationship together. These are healthy and Christian families.

Let me speak of another family. It is a family larger than any of these beautiful clusters sitting together so happily. For today is not merely a Homecoming. Today is also a Home Beginning Day. Today is a Home Addition Day.

Because today we are adding new members to a larger family of Christian community. We are baptizing new Christians today. As wonderful and fun as it is to gather our smaller families around this event, we are actually celebrating a larger community and family. We are claiming our heritage in that larger and longer line of people who have found their health and their delight in Jesus Christ our Lord.

You know that every family has its stories of ancestors and heroes, its stories of conflict and resolution. Those are the stories we tell around the dinner table. Those stories are worth telling and re-telling and teaching to our children and grandchildren.

It is today's lesson from the Epistle to the Hebrews that describes some of our Christian ancestors. My hope is that this year, as we begin another year of Christian education here at the Cathedral, our children and grandchildren and - indeed""we ourselves can discover, define, and declare our stories of ancestors and heroes and identity

Discover, define, declare. That is our Cathedral theme this Fall. Do you know who the Epistle to the Hebrews is talking about today?

Do you really know the story of Jericho, where your people once lived? Do you know your ancestors Rahab and Gideon? Do you know the great story of Barak who realized that he must follow the leadership of a woman in order to complete God's will? Why is Jephthah in our family history? How many stories do you know about your great ancestor David?

In our larger family of Christian faith, these are our ancestors, and mothers and fathers in the faith. Their stories describe the faith that you children are being baptized into today!

Little children, it is a great and glorious family you join today. Your allegiance to this household may cause you division within your nuclear families. And sometimes conflict and division occur naturally as people grow in independence and maturity and choice. Sometimes, severe conflicts arise in our larger Christian household of faith. Read the stories in the Bible!

But whatever the reason for the conflict, it is this larger family of faith, this community of Christ, that teaches us a greater grace.

Today we are baptizing you into this household of God. The head of this household is Jesus himself, the pioneer and

perfecter of our faith. Do you know what a pioneer is? Many of our ancestors were pioneers. They journeyed into unknown territory with inquiring and discerning hearts, with the courage to will and to persevere, and with the gift of joy and wonder in all God's works.

We are surrounded with that great cloud of witnesses in this church. It is time for us to discover them, define them, and declare them. With these witnesses, we point to Jesus today: the head of our household, our pioneer, our perfecter, our Lord.

AMEN.

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