

“Family of Origin, Family of Choice”
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Exodus 17:1-7; Philippians 2:1-13;
Family Weekend, Elon Community Church

Fred Young, former president of Elon, was fond of including in his welcome to parents at the New Student Convocation each fall, some remark like this: “History tells us that about 50 marriages will take place between members of each entering class, which means that 100 sets of potential in-laws are here this morning. You don’t know who you are yet. So my advice is to smile and be nice to everybody.”

Whether his numbers are right or not, and whether the marriages occur between members of the same class or between young men and women of different classes (between sophomores and seniors, for example), he was certainly correct that the college years often introduce us to our life partners. However, I have noticed a change since the 70’s when I first began my work in campus ministry: students are not marrying as early as they once did. I can recall several Commencement weekends that included not only graduation but also a wedding on the next day. “Well,” the couple would tell me, “both families are going to be here.” Not so much anymore. Most of the weddings I do for alums occur 3 - 5 years after graduation. Once in a while, a couple who met in college will ask to be married sometime in the following summer, but almost never on graduation weekend.

Marriages certainly signal the shift of primary attention away from a family of origin to a new family of choice. In the marriage ceremonies that I conduct, I generally say some thing like this to the parents of the couple:

“In the beginning, these two people were completely dependent upon you. Over time, they became more and more responsible for their own care. Today as they embark upon a new path of independence from you and mutual dependence upon one another, they want you to know that they treasure the love and care you gave to them over the years, for it has taught them what love is ... Today, as they leave your households to establish their own, they embrace one of the central values you have passed on to them – the joys, the struggles and the sacredness of family life.”

The new couple sets out to create a new family of their choosing, a new bond that is their own new creation. And so I endorse that in my marriage ceremonies with remarks to the couple like these:

“Marriage does not erase either of you; it respects the individual gifts of each. But a new personality is being forged in the crucible of your life together. So I ask you to hold this day in your memory, giving thanks always that God has so made the world that two people may join their separate lives into a remarkable unity – and that within this covenant you may fulfill your most intimate needs for faithfulness and love.”

We are born into families that we did not choose. Who chose us? Our parents? The sperm and the ovum? I suppose we might say that God chose the placement. In any case we arrive to a family structure that is already in place – hopefully mom and dad together; sometimes a single mom; supportive or distant grandparents; perhaps aunts and uncles, perhaps not. Over all of that we have no choice.

But our arrival certainly changes the family dynamic. A first child dramatically alters the relationship of mom and dad. There is no dyad anymore when it comes to making decisions; there is a triad – a child to feed, clothe, bathe, entertain and educate ... and whose diaper needs changing! Add other children and before long the math gets complicated; pretty soon you have a quadratic equation!

The health of a family of origin certainly shapes the experience of the newborn, the toddler, the child, the teenager, the adolescent, the young adult. In the beginning, children are radically dependant upon the care of the adults in their lives. So they learn the family dynamics as naturally as breathing. The pioneering family therapist Virginia Satir said that every family establishes rules or patterns of behavior around four themes: **Self-worth** – how do the family members view themselves, as worthy or unworthy? Can emotions be freely expressed, or are they repressed? **Communication** – is it vague and not really honest or is it direct and

truthful? Are there some things “we just don’t speak about in this house”? And there are **Family Rules** about how members are supposed to feel and act – are they both fair and flexible, or are they rigid, or arbitrarily applied? Finally, how are family members taught to **Relate to Outsiders**? Does the family communicate, “You are safe here, but the world outside is full of dangers”? Or, does the family indicate that your safety here gives you courage to explore and take appropriate risks?

One of Satir’s books was titled *Peoplemaking*. She wrote: “Feelings of worth can flourish only in an atmosphere where individual differences are appreciated, mistakes are tolerated, communication is open, and rules are flexible -- the kind of atmosphere that is found in a nurturing family”

When I first came to this community 24 years ago, Bob Stogner was a counselor at Elon Homes for Children. He shared with me a perspective that helped me understand my own history and that I have shared with numbers of students. There are three things to say to our family of origin if we want to have a healthy relationship with that family. Learn to say these three things: I love you; I forgive you; and I am different from you.

The first (“I love you”) is relatively easy for most of us to say, especially if we grew up in a family where love is comfortably expressed. The second (“I forgive you”) may seem puzzling at first if you grew up in that loving family. You may wonder if you’ve had wonderful parents, “What do I need to forgive?” ... But now that my children are grown – moved out, making their way in the world – I am sure that they can name the ways that I inhibited their growth. My oldest son, for instance, once asked for a drum set, but I could not bring myself to buy it for him. My need for relative quiet in the house trumped his desire to be a drummer. ... I pray that that is the most serious way that I stunted his growth; but I don’t know. It’s really for him to say, and hopefully, forgive.

The third (“I am different from you”) comes about in a self-affirmation – a self-assertion – that gives us the space in which to become not who our parents and grandparents want us to be, but who by God’s grace, we were born to be. Wise are the parents who can read the signs that their son or daughter is coming into their own, discovering their own uniqueness, and can affirm that insight and support that emergence into adulthood. After all, the goal of all our parenting is that our sons and daughters move beyond their dependency upon us into their own self-understanding as adults. The life agenda of the college years for parents and their offspring is precisely this negotiation – for the students to come to see themselves as adults and for their parents to wholeheartedly agree.

Now that we have this family systems perspective in mind, let’s see what we notice in today’s scriptures. In the Exodus passage, the family called Israel faces a double crisis. They are thirsty in a dry land and they are profoundly unhappy with their leader Moses.

First, let’s recall how the name Israel came to be. Jacob, after a long night of wrestling with his fears, receives the name Israel. Do you remember Jacob’s story? He stole his brother’s birthright by tricking his father into thinking that he was Esau. Jacob, the smooth son, wrapped the skin of an animal around his arm and presented himself as the hunter so that he could receive his father’s blessing before Esau came in from the field. That so enraged Esau that Jacob had to flee to the land of his mother’s people. He was gone for a very long time, long enough to grow up, mature, marry and have children of his own and acquire wealth. Finally, he hears God say to him, “Return to your country and to your kindred and I will do you good.” He realizes that he must reconcile with his brother. On his way back, he sends emissaries to Esau and learns that Esau is coming toward him with 400 men; Jacob is genuinely afraid. He sends ahead of him presents of goats and rams and camels, hoping that they will appease his brother. He crosses the river Jabbok, separates himself from his wives and children. And he is left alone that night.

Then ensues the event that forever changed his life. Jacob wrestles all night with an angel of the Lord, and his hip was put out of joint. As dawn approached and the wrestling match continued, Jacob says famously, “I will not let you go until you bless me.” At that point, he received a new identity. “Your name shall no more be

called Jacob, but Israel for you have striven with God and with men and have prevailed.” And the name of the patriarch became the name of the people.

Is-rae-el, the people who strive with God. And here they are again in the desert of the Sinai Peninsula, thirsty and contentious. “Have you brought us out of Egypt just to kill us and our children and our cattle with thirst?” So Moses takes that precise question to God who reminds him that he still has rod that he used to part the waters so that the people could pass out of Egypt into freedom. Now use that rod, God instructs him, to strike the rock at Horeb and water will come forth from artesian wells to quench the thirst of the whole congregation. Moses gave the place two names, Massah and Meribah, marking it as the place of Proof and of Contention – proof that God was still providing for his people, even though they were still contending with him.

I sometimes think that the Book of Exodus was written to illustrate that God is always working to rescue his contentious, sometimes dysfunctional family!

And that theme continues into the New Testament, though the tone is more gentle when Paul writes to the congregation at Philippi, the first church that Paul had founded on the continent of Europe, a family of his choosing for whom he clearly has warm affection. He pleads that this family of faith might be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” Paul wrote this letter (or the letters that may have been collected here) because he had received news that some petty jealousies and rivalries were emerging within the family. “Let each of you look not only to your own interests but also to the interests of others.”

And the example that Paul provides for what this means is this most famous theological affirmation, perhaps among the oldest Christian hymns.

In the New International Version, it reads this way:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,
but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death—
even death on a cross!

If I asked you to identify another New Testament passage that this one echoes, I suspect that many of you would quote John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” But let’s add verse 17, “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved.” Here God is the agent, the initiator. God sends His only Son into the world..

But in the Philippians passage, it is Jesus who is the agent. Jesus chooses to be among us. Jesus, not thinking of his equality with God to be held onto with a tight fist “empties himself,” takes on human form, becomes one of us. So, might we say that Jesus came from his Family of Origin in the Trinity to take human form in his Family of Choice? That’s an intriguing thought to me. That Jesus chose us to be his family. And without rejecting his Family of Origin! In fact in another letter to the church in Corinth, Paul writes, “God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.” The work of Jesus as the Christ was to bridge the distance between God and Creation, between our origin and the world of our choosing.

So, today, let us celebrate not that he was sent but that he chose to be one of us! We are his Family of Choice, the family of his new creation.

Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Amen.