

*While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* Matthew 12:46-50

Most of us have noticed that over past few weeks there was an inordinate amount of focus in the news on the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle – which also brought more notice to Queen Elizabeth and Prince Philip, as well as Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles; and Prince William and Catherine Middleton and their children – Prince George, Princess Charlotte and Prince Louis. In a world whose leaders are either dictatorial or democratic - this kingdom family is currently the most publicly prominent family or rulers in the world. And because it is so, there is a plethora of books and movies that claim to give us insight into what it's like to be born into a kingdom family. But the more you come to know about the royal family, the more you come to know that they are just as human as we are - and that all of them, to varying degrees, struggle with being born into a royal family. At times the sentiment seems to be that if they had a choice, they might have chosen a different family.

In the same way, we do not have a choice as what family we are born into. What if we could select who would be our mother or father or brothers and sisters? Most of us would pass on the idea because we love our families just the way they are, but I also know some of us would jump at that idea. You look at a family picture and see people you got “stuck” being related to, so you would think it wonderful to exchange them for other people you like better. But we don't have a choice when it comes to our family of origin. Yet we do have choice as to where we can become related to the royal family of God which is of the Kingdom of God where Jesus is our brother because we have been adopted by God.

*“While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him.”* Our text opens in shadow of Jesus confronting and challenging those who aggressively opposed him in Matthew 11-12. We now read that Jesus was still busy talking to the multitudes of people that had gathered around him inside a house. Notice that Jesus' mother and brothers were “*outside*.” Luke 8:19 tells us that *“Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd.”* It is understandable that there was a large crowd, as Jesus had only recently returned to Capernaum with his twelve chosen disciples after proclaiming the kingdom of God in the cities and villages of Galilee. When people learned that Jesus had returned, they gathered there and Jesus ministered to them. And as the news spread, even more people came. Last week, we read that during this time Jesus healed a demon-possessed man who was blind and dumb so that he could see and speak - prompting the people to begin wonder if Jesus was the promised Messiah.

As Jesus ministered to the crowds, he became so busy that he and his disciples did not take time to eat. In Mark 3:21 we read that when Jesus' family heard this, *“they went out to seize him, for they were saying, ‘He is out of his mind.’”* Undoubtedly his family had come and then reacted this way out of a desire to protect Jesus, but it is also likely they do so with some sense of unbelief. While they thought Jesus was “*out of his mind*” because he so focused on ministering to the crowds of people who followed him that he wouldn't take time to care for himself – most of them still were not fully convinced Jesus was the Messiah of God that he claimed to be. But either way, it is safe to assume that it was out of a genuine concern for Jesus that His mother, Mary, and his brothers, James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matthew 13:55) had come to see him, in order to rescue him from his current situation. Now we're not sure whether they wanted to persuade him to leave and go to a place where he could have more peace or just to come home with them where they could protect and take care of Him. The reality is that Jesus did not need to be rescued, and he used this moment to reveal to us his Kingdom family.

*“But he replied to the man who told him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’”* In these words Jesus calls us to separate ourselves from family as the world defines family. This is not in contradiction to other truths of God’s Word which calls us to honor our fathers and mothers, to love and cherish and respect our spouses, to raise up and care for our children. But by asking and answering the question *“Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?”* Jesus demonstrated that spiritual relationships are more important than physical relationships. Jesus was not renouncing his physical family. Jesus loved His family. But here Jesus teaches us that a blood related family is not nearly as important as a spiritually related family. Eternity in heaven is not gained because of our physical relationship with our families on earth. If we think we will make it to heaven because some relative of ours is a born-again Christian, then think again. The Jewish leaders of that time thought they merited heaven simply because they were blood descendants of Abraham. They were wrong. Here we find that even Jesus’ blood relatives are not part of his spiritual family until they come to him personally and place their faith in him as Savior and humbly submit to him as Lord. In this passage we find an invitation to everyone to become part of Jesus’ family, but there is one qualification that must be met to become part of God’s family.

*“For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”* Jesus tells us here that those who born-again into God’s family into the Kingdom of God are those who do the will of his *“Father in heaven.”* What Jesus is clearly pointing out here is that *when* there is a conflict between who God is in our lives and the demands God puts on our life - and the relationship, advice, counsel, influence and demands of our relatives – that God, and the truth of God’s Word and the power of the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and the presence of the Holy Spirit must have preeminent authority. In other words, who God is and what God says must be THEE single deciding factor in our lives. We must separate ourselves from the pressures, control and power of the flesh of the world - even if it means separating ourselves from our biological family. Jesus is defining family here not in terms of *biology*, but rather in terms of *theology*: *“Whoever does the will of God.”* This is not so much about a prescription of what to do, but rather a description of what the Kingdom family looks like.

What does a Kingdom family look like? Jesus has already told us in Matthew. Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand. Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Do not resist the one who is evil. Do not be anxious about your life. Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them. Love your enemies. Pray for those who persecute you. Forgive others their trespasses. Judge not, that you be not judged. Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart. Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The wondrous blessing of *doing the will of God* is that God adopts us into the family of the Kingdom. In Ephesians 1:3-6 the apostle Paul declares: *“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons 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.”* Before the Earth was ever created, God chose us and predestined us to be adopted into his family as His children into the Kingdom of God through Jesus Christ - because of His love, His goodness, His kindness, His mercy and His grace.

In Romans 8:12-17 we read of more blessings of being adopted into the family of the King. *“So then, brothers, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, “Abba! Father!” The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him.”* Take note these verses emphasize that the true adopted children of God are those that are led by the Holy Spirit rather yielding themselves to be led by things of the flesh. But take note as well the wonderful truth that as adopted children of God we are *“fellow heirs”* with Jesus Christ. In 1 John 3:1 the apostle John says: *“See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!”*

The Kingdom family of God is a God-adopted group of people who have shared commitments to God, gathered together for the purpose of surrendering their lives to Jesus Christ, united in heart by the power of the Holy Spirit. We are not born into that; we are *born-again* into that. That’s true for Nancy and I. Since coming to Christ we have less in common with our biological families. We love them even as we differ from them in what *love* means. We have found our true eternal family to be our family in Christ. That reality is constantly born out in our family at Arrowsmith – you have loved and cared for us as only a family of God could. God’s call to separate ourselves in spirit from our biological family is a call to an eternal adoption into the family of God. Some of us have the blessing of both; some of our biological families are also part of God’s family. That is truly what it means to be twice blessed.

As a church, we must take seriously Jesus’ ideal of family here; we must create and nurture our hearts for God and seek to make Arrowsmith a place where all who come will desire a deeper relationship with God our Father, and with another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ. It will also require we share more than sitting next to one another on Sunday, more than an occasional or even a regular conversation just on Sunday morning. Being a member of God’s family means sharing our joys together, sharing our pain together, sharing our homes and our food and our time and our lives together. Being a member of God’s family means laughing together, crying together, learning together, growing together, healing together, dreaming together. Being a member of God’s family means getting baptized, joining a small group, giving your tithe and your time, joining the church in membership.

The word *membership* may have just caused you to tense up. This happens for two reasons: some discount church membership all together, others believe in membership but have had some pretty painful experiences in churches. Regarding those who discount church membership need to open their Bibles and hearts to the blessed reality of membership. We see that clearly in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27 implies church membership by using the body as an image for the church: *“For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body . . . and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. . . . But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.”* Just like child dedication, baptism and the Lord’s Supper - membership in the church is another physical reflection of a spiritual reality that has occurred in one’s heart and soul. Becoming a member of a church reflects the spiritual reality that you have been adopted into the family of the King.

Membership is rejected by some by reason that we are all already members of the universal church. While that is true in the big picture of our faith, it is not true when it comes to the local church. God's Word tells us that the apostle Paul planted local churches, not universal churches. He wrote letters to guide and correct and encourage local churches - and he returned to local churches to build them up and strengthen them. The writer of Hebrews was writing not writing to the universal church but the local church when he wrote: "*Let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near*" (Hebrews 10:24-25), and "*Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you*" (Hebrews 13:17). These last words to "obey our leaders" reflect the reality that our resistance to things like church membership are most likely an echo of our rebellion against God's authority in our relationship with God in the Garden. Though created by God to be a member of the family of God, we chose to reject our dependence on God and our place in the family of God. This is why Jesus went to the cross. His sacrificial death on the cross in our place for our sins, provided a way for us to be restored back into the family of God – so we might live with God and live for God, following Jesus together in the mercy and grace of interdependence.

Mark Dever, in his book "What is a Healthy Church?" writes: "A temple has bricks. A flock has sheep. A vine has branches. And a body has members. In one sense, membership begins when Christ saves us and makes us a member of his body. Yet his work must then be given expression in an actual local church. In that sense, church membership begins when we commit to a particular body. Being a Christian means being joined to a church. The practice of church membership among Christians occurs when Christians grasp hold of each other in responsibility and love. By identifying ourselves with a particular local church, we are telling the church's pastors and other members not just that we commit to them, but that we commit to the in-gathering, giving, prayer and service. We are telling them to expect certain thing from us and to hold us accountable if we don't follow through."

God has providentially given us a personal and a congregational application about this commitment in Article II, Section 3 of the By-laws of Arrowsmith that were unanimously approved in January 2017, regarding the definition of a Member in Good Standing, which reads as follows: "Church membership does not involve an expectation to live a perfect life, but rather a commitment to worship and minister in a body of believers, where the members covenant together to hold each other accountable to pursue *obedience* to what God teaches us in Scripture. This pursuit of *obedience* is not the same as perfection, but the mark of a church "member in good standing" is regular attendance in worship and continuous involvement in the ministries of the church; with a commitment to love one another and forgive each other; and a persistence to humbly recognize sin as sin, confessing it and turning away from it, towards a new resolve of holiness in their lives again and again, in a manner that would build up the church and glorify Jesus Christ." May we be a family of the Kingdom that reflects these words.

Regarding those who have had painful experiences in churches with relationships or conflict or leadership – as a member of a church, and as a pastor, I truly know and share your pain. Eleven years ago I began the journey of seeing if I ever could love the church again. I am glad I walked down that painful path – that's why I am here. Yes, there can be pain in the church – but there's pain in all of life. But there is also is healing in the church – because *Jesus is the church*. Membership in the church is a blood-bought gift of God's grace and the church is the life-sustaining, faith-strengthening, joy-preserving means of God's mercy to us. I beg you would not cut yourself off from that blessing. We must, brothers and sisters, embrace one another within our church family as our very own parents, brothers, sisters, and children. Just as God has adopted us into His eternal family in Jesus, we also must adopt one another, accept responsibility for one another, and be committed to one another.

*“For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.*

*Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness. For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words. And he who searches hearts knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.*

*What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Romans 8:18-29*

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