Faith Family Ties  
Part 1 – What the Neighbors Ought to Say About Us  
Ephesians 4:1-6  

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ September 7, 2008 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6, New Revised Standard Version)

Do you remember the neighborhood where you grew up? If you’re like me, the memories are vivid.

This week I went on the internet to Google Maps to look at my old neighborhood and take a walk down memory lane. Did you know that Google now has this feature where you can see photographic images of your neighborhood from street level? It’s amazing. And with the click of my mouse I took a tour of that very familiar landscape of Williams Lane.

As I scanned past the houses I could easily remember the families who used to live there 30 years ago. I saw the Burke’s old house at the end of the cul-de-sac. They were the family that never got along. You could hear them screaming at each other at all hours of the day and night. Man, could they yell. Everybody on the block knew that the Burke family loved to fight.

I saw the McAtee’s old place, right across the street from our house. The four McAtee kids were great in sports, known city-wide for their athletic exploits. Everybody wanted Billy McAtee on their team during our neighborhood games of pick-up football.

Up the street was the Levinson house. They were the only Jewish family on our block and Mr. and Mrs. Levinson were very serious about their faith and were going to pass that on to their children. That’s what they were known for.

You know, I could just about go right down the street and tell you what family lived in each house and what that family was known for in the neighborhood. Every family had certain traits which were unique.

It makes me wonder what our neighbors back then would have said about us. What were the Chapmans known for? What was unique about that family down at the end of the street in the yellow house?

Makes me wonder what my neighbors today would say about my family. And if I went around your block this afternoon, what your neighbors would say about your family? What traits would they list? Wouldn’t you love to know?

Makes me wonder what our neighbors would say about us? Imagine asking people in this community, “What do you know about that Faith Presbyterian family that lives over there at 625 Florin Road? What are those people like?” What do you think people would say? What kind of traits, if any, do you think we’re known for? What kind of traits are Christians in general known for?

I want to spend the next several weeks on this question. But instead of asking our neighbors, I want to ask God’s Word. I want us to look in the scriptures to see what traits God wants his family, the church, to be known for in the world. In particular I want to look at Paul’s letter to the Ephesians. Because this was a letter originally written with this intent, to help the church understand what traits it was to be known for in the world.
Paul, the author of Ephesians, writes this letter from prison to the church in Ephesus. And he begins this section of his letter with these words: “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received.”

Did you ever have a parent, or a grandparent, or somebody in your family who made clear to you at some point that because you were in this family, certain things were expected? Maybe when you were younger, somebody told you that there was a family name to uphold, a family reputation or image that needed to be preserved.

My parents never put it in those words, but I know that, like all parents, they hoped that when their two sons went out in public that we would behave a certain way. There were certain things that Chapmans were supposed to do and certain things that Chapmans were not supposed to do, certain expectations which came with that name. And honestly, I know there were more than a few times when I failed to meet those expectations. I know there were even a few instances when my folks wanted to make sure others knew, “You know Jeff is adopted. Just wanted to make sure you knew that. Really, we’re doing the best with what we got.”

Paul here is essentially saying the same thing to the church. He’s saying, “Listen, as the church you are the people of Christ. You are the sons and daughters of the Living God. And you have a high calling in life. There are certain and specific things which are expected of you now that you carry the name Christian in this world.”

Though we don’t have time to read it here, that high calling is fleshed out in the first three chapters of Ephesians. And in those passages, Paul tells the church that God, through Jesus Christ, has broken into the world and is in the midst of putting the world back together again. God is bringing the kingdom of heaven to earth. And the church is the place where those things of heaven are supposed to be most visible. In other words, the church is supposed to be the place where the world gets to see the kind of life God has planned – a life of peace, and grace, and joy, and deep community. A life where people realize their potential, and find meaningful work, and offer justice and forgiveness to each other.

The church, then, should look quite different from the rest of the world. It should be a place where the world gets a wonderful taste of heaven. That is the high calling Paul speaks about here. And there is no higher calling. And we are, Paul says, to live lives worthy of that calling. We are to have family traits in the church that reflect that calling.

In verses 2, then, Paul gives us some of those traits. He lists four of them. He writes, “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.”

Let’s take some time to touch on each one of these traits. Again, these are the traits for which our Faith family ought to be known in our neighborhood.

**Trait #1 – Humility**

Paul says, “Be completely humble.” Don’t think of yourself more highly than you ought to think of yourself. And do not think of others more lowly than you ought to think of them.1

Here’s a great way to understand humility. If you are a humble person, you are somebody who sees yourself and others in the proper place. And that doesn’t mean that you are always putting yourself down. No. That’s not humility. If Tiger Woods recognizes that he is the greatest golfer on the planet, which he clearly is, that doesn’t mean he isn’t being humble. In fact, for him shuffle his feet and say that his golf game is really nothing special, well that is false humility. Again, humility is seeing yourself and others in your proper place, whether that place is high or low.

What happens to us so often, however, is that we try to elevate ourselves to places that do not belong to us. Or, we try to demote others to places that do not belong to them. And that’s not humility. That’s arrogance. That’s pride. That’s self-delusion. And those are traits that have no place in this family.

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1 This is put beautifully elsewhere by Paul in Philippians 2:3-4.
For, you see, in the church we are to see ourselves and others in our proper place. That means that you see your brothers and sisters in this congregation just as they are, as human beings created in the image of God, our Father. We are brothers and sisters all on the same level. The small child in this family has as much value in God’s eyes as the old man, and the old man as much value as the young man. The new member and the founding member have equal places in the family. The elder and the Sunday school teacher, the pastor and the deacon, though they have different jobs, no one is more important or valuable in this family than the other.

When we remember this, and treat each other according to our proper place as God’s children, things work well in the family. Just think about it. I guarantee that the people you find it easier to get along with, easier to work with, easier to live with, are always the people who treat you with humility, the people who recognize your proper place, not less and not more, and treat you accordingly.

**Trait #2 – Gentleness**

Paul says we are to also be completely gentle. But gentleness, understand, doesn’t mean weak. That’s not at all what Paul had in mind.

You see, the Greek word Paul uses here was a word that was often used to describe domesticated animals in his day. Think of an ox. This big, powerful animal which had been trained to keep its strength under control. So when its master gave the order, the ox, with amazing strength, pulls a thousand pounds on a cart, or plows through soil that was as hard as rock. But at other times, the same animal could restrain that strength and be so gentle that a small child could let it eat grain out of her hands.

That’s what gentleness means to Paul. That’s the trait he wants to see in the family of the church. People who have great strength, or great ability, or great position, but are willing to set those things aside when necessary for the sake of our master, Christ, or for the sake of one another.

This also needs to be a trait of our family here at Faith. There are times when you and I may be called to set aside our position, or our age, or our longevity in the church, or our knowledge, for the sake of others. I think of the church leader who could probably use his influence and position to bully others and get his way, but chooses instead to hold back for the sake of God’s way. I think of the person here at Faith who has achieved great success and acclaim in her outside work, yet she refuses to use that stature to unduly influence people here.

One writer said that these first two traits go together hand in hand. “The gentle man thinks as little of his personal claims, as the humble man thinks of his personal merits.”² That says it well, I think.

**Trait #3 – Longsuffering**

In this version, we have the world patience. But I like the word you’ll often find in old translations, longsuffering. To me, that really says what Paul is getting at here with this trait.

Commentator William Barclay uses a simple image to help us understand this trait. He talks about seeing an older dog having to endure the antics of a playful puppy. Have you ever seen this? The puppy yaps at the big dog; he bites him; he growls at him; he attacks him; he pulls on his ears and tail. And all the time the big dog, who could annihilate that puppy with one snap of his teeth, puts up with the puppy’s pestering with great dignity.³ That is longsuffering. And that is a trait Paul says is to be in our family here at Faith.

Now, let’s be honest. There are people in our church family who annoy you. I don’t want names, but raise your hand if there are people here at Faith who, at times, annoy you.

Those of you who aren’t raising your hands are really annoying me right now. And if you’re not raising your hand it’s either because you’re not telling the truth or because you don’t know me and the rest of the people of this church well

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enough! Don’t the people in your families at home annoy you at times? Of course they do. So why should we expect it to be any different in this family?

This is a reality. Paul knows it. God knows it. People will annoy us. Sometimes it’s just their personality. Sometimes it’s the decisions they make, or the mistakes they constantly repeat, or the ways they can be oblivious to things which should be obvious. Regardless of what annoys us, as brothers and sisters in Christ we are to suffer long with each other. And even when we are in position to strike back, to snap our teeth at another person who keeps nipping at our tail, God wants us to be patient with each other.

**Trait #4 – Love**

Paul, with this trait, saves the best for last. In his words, we are to “bear with one another in love.” And of all our family traits, this one is supreme. Above all, we are to love each other.

Now, as you may know, the Greek language, which Paul uses here, didn’t just have one word for love. They had at least three. There was *eros* love, or romantic love. The passion that sometimes exists between a man and a woman. It’s where we get our word *erotic*. Then there was *philos* love, which was a love of friendship. The city of Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, takes its name from this ancient word.

But the most powerful word for love which the Greeks had, the word which Paul uses here is *agape*. And agape love, rather than being a love of passion or affection, was a love of decision. It was a love that didn’t depend on emotions or feelings, but on the will. I’ve heard it described this way: Agape love is “unconquerable benevolence.” And if we regard another person with agape love, “nothing that person can or will ever do will make us seek anything but their highest good.”

When I was a kid, sometimes my parents would say to me, concerning my little brother, “Jeff, you don’t have to like him. But you do need to love him.” Anybody’s parents ever use that line on them? Anybody, like me, now use it on their own kids?

That never made sense to me. What do you mean I don’t have to like him but I have to love him? That’s impossible. If I can’t even like him, how do you expect me to love him? You’re asking me to hit a home run and I can’t even make it to first base! You’ve got to walk before you can run! That never made sense to me.

What I didn’t understand back then is that liking a person actually has very little, if anything, to do with loving a person with agape love. What I now understand is that even when I don’t like somebody, even when I feel resentment, feel bitterness, and even feel hatred towards another person, those feelings I have don’t necessarily have to control my will or my actions. In other words, regardless of how I feel, it is always still within my power to act to seek the highest good of another person, even when that person doesn’t seek my highest good.

And above all the traits that God wants to see in his family, the church, this is it. So much so that there are points in scripture where God makes it clear that if you don’t love others in the church in this way, then the love of God is not in you. 1st John 4:8 says, “Whoever does not [show agape] love does not know God, because God is [agape] love.”

That fact is, in the same way that you are going to be annoyed by others in the church, there are also going to be people in this church who you do not like. That’s reality. And God says to us, “Bear with each other in love. You don’t have to like all your brothers and sisters. You do have to learn to love them. You don’t have to get warm fuzzies when you think about them. You do have to learn to act in a way that always seeks their highest good.” Of all the traits of this Faith family, love must be supreme.

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**Barclay, p. 164-165.**
Humility. Gentleness. Longsuffering. Love. What do you notice about these four traits? What do these traits all have in common with one another? It’s simple. Each of them, at the heart, involves getting the self out of the center for the sake of God and for the sake of the family.

I mean, we live in a world where the dominate trait we see is self-centeredness. Everywhere we look, people do everything they can to get everyone else to revolve around them. And when others don’t cooperate, humility goes out the window, as does gentleness. People lose their patience. And only those who are liked get treated with love.

Everywhere you go, you will see this. At nearly every other house in the neighborhood. And that’s why when the family living here at 625 Florin Road learns a different way of living together and adopts a different set of traits, it really sticks out.

Now, of course, these traits do not come easily. Anybody here have an easy time living these out? Not me. None of us do.

Thankfully, however, we have a model before us. For in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s own Son, we see these in living color.

In Christ we see humility and gentleness. Before Jesus, in fact, these qualities were scorned in the ancient world. There isn’t even one positive word in the entire Greek language for humility. Humility was not a thing to be desired. But Jesus changed that. He always saw himself and others in the proper place. And though he was God himself, he set aside his position and power and took on the form of a servant, even kneeling down to wash the filthy feet of his followers.

In Jesus we also see longsuffering. Let’s face it - we must annoy God terribly at times. I know I try his patience daily. Knowing the rest of you, I bet you do too! Yet, over and over again the New Testament uses this very word to describe God’s attitude towards us. He is patient with us. Though so often in a place where he has every right to strike back at us, God doesn’t. He suffers long with us.

And, of course, in Jesus we see agape love. In fact, who, more than Jesus, embodies this kind of love? Nobody. Even if we hate God, God always acts with our best interests in mind. Always. This cross, and this table remind us of that. For even when we were his enemies, even when we were against him, Christ died for us.

Jesus, you see, shows us what these traits look like. But that is not enough. We need more than a model. So it’s good news that Jesus also, (and this is key!) helps us embody them. For as we trust in Christ, as we give our lives to him, the Spirit of Christ comes to literally dwell within us, both in our hearts and in this family. As Paul writes here in this passage: “There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to one hope when you were called – one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”

In this family we are brothers and sisters. That means we share the same Father. And the Spirit of our Father, the Spirit of Christ himself, is over all and through all and in all. And as we submit to that Spirit, as we pray, and confess, and ask for help, and give our best effort, God, in time, will transform us from the inside out. And then, by the grace of God, we will be able to begin to demonstrate to one another, and to the world around us, these traits which, otherwise, could not be possible.

In another of his letters, Galatians, Paul puts it this way: “The fruit of the Spirit – [the traits that the Spirit of God produces in us] – are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” Not only do we see these traits in Christ, but also the Spirit of Christ, as we allow it, will produce these traits in us.

And when that happens, brothers and sisters, we then begin to live lives worthy of the calling we have received. And then people in the neighborhood begin to notice. People in the world, as is the intention of God, look at this family and see the sort of life God wants for us all.

6 Galatians 5:22.
~ Can you remember the neighborhood of your childhood? If asked at that time, what would your neighbors would have said about your family? What traits were you known for in the neighborhood?

~ Read the Ephesians 4:1-6 passage again. Read both versions printed on the front. After reading this again, particularly The Message version, what jumps off the page to you? What part of Paul’s message particularly speaks to you today?

~ The four traits Paul says the church family ought to demonstrate are humility, gentleness, patience (or longsuffering), and love. Which of these qualities is most difficult for you to embody here in this congregation? Why?

~ How about our congregation in general? Which of these four qualities would you say that Faith Presbyterian Church, at this time, best embodies?

~ How would you characterize the unity of our congregation at this time? In what ways is it strong? In what ways could it be strengthened? How could you, or your Life Group, contribute to our unity in Christ?

~ How can God help us to be transformed into this kind of family? Do we learn to act like Jesus by sheer effort alone? If not, how does God help us change? (Paul, by the way, has some great words along these lines in Romans 12:1-2. What’s his point here?)

Further Scripture Readings for the Week:

**Monday:** Philippians 2:1-11 (A marvelous passage on imitating Christ’s humility)

**Tuesday:** Romans 2:4, I Timothy 1:16, I Peter 3:20, II Peter 3:15 (On God’s patience)

**Wednesday:** Galatians 5:16-26 (Paul on the fruits of the Holy Spirit)

**Thursday:** I John 4:7-21 (We must learn to love each other in the church)

**Friday:** I Corinthians 13 (An incredible description of agape love)

**Saturday:** Romans 12:1-21 (Beautiful and challenging words about life in the family of God)