

The Cruciform Family

I have a big ask this morning. I'm going to talk about stories I haven't read to completion, stories many of you read years ago—*The Chronicles of Narnia*. I understand that the statute of limitations has long expired for reading these classic stories. Nevermind that—no spoilers, please. How can one be ordained an Anglican priest without reading *The Chronicles of Narnia*? I don't know. I slipped through the cracks, or skipped the wardrobe, you might say.

But I'm living in repentance, reading these stories with Madeleine now. Actually I made a conscious decision several years back that I would wait to read these stories with her, so we experience them together the first time.

As we're reading the Narnia stories, I've noticed the theme of home appearing from one volume to the next, both the people and the places that make a home. Children leave their birth home for another country. Some homes decay, some are frozen, some are warm and humble, others grand and glorious. From the London attics that Digory and Polly explore to the royal castle at Cair Paravel where Peter, Edmund, Susan, and Lucy rule as Kings and Queens of Narnia, the themes of one's true home and true family permeate these stories.

Presently Madeleine and I are in the middle of *Prince Caspian* (no spoilers!) when Caspian leaves the household of his usurping tyrant uncle, King Miraz, to discover the people and places of Old Narnia. Caspian discovers the loyalists of Old Narnia, the animals who are in hiding, yet remain loyal to Aslan. Having fled his royal household, he meets badgers, owls, ravens, bears, and of course, dwarves. The dwarves give me the perfect opportunity to revive my Scottish accent for Madeleine.

After Caspian takes a tour to meet the animals in hiding, he finds a circle of fauns dancing at the Dancing Lawn. Lewis writes, "Before he knew what he was doing, [Caspian] found himself joining in the dance." Caspian falls asleep on the Dancing Lawn after the dancing ended and awoke to a new joy in that place. "To sleep under the stars, to drink nothing but well water and to live chiefly on nuts and wild fruit, was a strange experience for Caspian after his bed with silken sheets in a tapestried chamber at the castle, with meals laid out on gold and silver dishes in the anteroom, and attendants ready at his call. *But he had never enjoyed himself more.*

Never had sleep been more refreshing nor food tasted more savory, and [Caspian] began to already to harden and his face wore a kinglier look."¹

Life on the Dancing Lawn is a scene of family, a sort of homecoming.

For the past three weeks, we've read three segments of a single discourse Jesus gives to his disciples. The Lord sends his twelve disciples to 'the lost sheep of the house of Israel.' In each of these three segments, Jesus instructs his disciples how to conduct themselves among the households of Israel. As Jesus send his disciples to the lost families of Israel, we might say that the Lord seeks his true family. He sends his family of disciples to invite lost families into his Kingdom. /

Now, before we wrestle with Jesus' difficult words about family in today's reading, we have to wrestle with another matter: how Jesus defines family. Elsewhere in Matthew's Gospel, someone notified Jesus that his mother and brothers waited to speak with him. Jesus replied to the messenger, "'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.*"²

Now that statement sounds offensive in any time and place, but it's especially shocking in Jewish culture, which is a culture based on *tribal identity*. So when I say Jesus sends his 'family of disciples' I hope you understand the weight of that phrase. *Jesus redefines family in his kingdom*. At the cross, you see this **redefinition** when Jesus says to Mary and John, 'Woman, behold your son. Behold, your mother.' In Jesus' Kingdom, the strongest bond is *not* the bond of blood, but the bond of God's Holy Spirit. The greatest claim on your life is not your *first birth* by blood; it is the **second** birth by water and the Holy Spirit. Jesus places his Kingdom family at the center of life, not the family of birth.

Now I need to give this disclaimer before proceeding further: this doesn't reject marriage or family life. Far from it. Christ blesses marriage at a wedding in Cana of Galilee. The Lord welcomes children into his arms and blesses them. Paul instructs parents in the upbringing of their children. Marriage is a sacrament of Christ's Kingdom, a sign of God's love and new creation. Marriage and family life is instrumental in Jesus' new creation mission.

¹ C.S. Lewis, *Prince Caspian*, 88.

² Mt. 12.28-50

But **baptism** is a higher sacrament than marriage. Marriage isn't necessary for salvation, but you might get that impression from American evangelicals. If you *imply* that marriage is necessary in God's Kingdom, you create a second-class citizenship for those who are unmarried. But Christ is not divided! Paul, an unmarried man, gave us this doctrine of unity in God's kingdom: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.'³

So Jesus redefines family in his Kingdom. He sends his Kingdom family—his apostles—to the lost families of Israel. And remember these apostles have left their natural families for Jesus' sake. They have 'left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for Jesus' sake.'⁴ And now they enter living rooms with the Lord's message: the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Some households will embrace that kingdom, others will reject it. On the whole, Jesus prepares his disciples for rejection more than welcome. For some in Israel, Jesus' Kingdom will set 'a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.'⁵

Just as Lewis threads the household theme in the Narnia stories, you can trace the household theme in Matthew's Gospel. Do you remember the story Jesus told about the foolish person who built his house on sand? He contrasts a foolish man with a wise man who built his house on the rock. For decades I read that story wrongly. You can't understand Jesus' parable unless you recognize that this story concludes the Sermon on the Mount. The Sermon on the Mount is the summary of Jesus' kingdom. And that kingdom summarized is this: deny yourself and embrace the cross so you can love God and love your neighbor.

The wise person builds his house on Jesus' kingdom. Vulnerable though his house may *seem*, his household withstands the assaults of storms and wind and flood. But the foolish man, pursuing his own kingdom, builds his household on a foundation of sand. When the storms and floods come, that house will fall.

So when Jesus sends his family of apostles to the households of Israel, he prepares them to enter households built on a foundation of sand.

³ Galatians 3.28

⁴ Matthew 19.29

⁵ Matthew 10.35-36

Now here's the truth about every household, both in ancient Israel and today—every household builds on a foundation of love. Human beings are lovers, we were made for worship. We can't help but build on love. The foundation of a household is the *ultimate love* of those who dwell therein.

You can build a household where the ultimate love is the children and you will end up worshiping the children. A household can place the marriage as the ultimate love and spouses will make idols of one another. A parent or grandparent may require loyalty or allegiance to the family name and family heritage will be your god. You can build a household on all kinds of love, but it may not have the love of Jesus at its foundation. Where Jesus is *not* the ultimate love of the household, that house is built on a foundation of sand. It cannot withstand storms and wind and floods. Jesus said, 'Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.'⁶

About seven years ago, Emily and I were looking for a home in the months before Madeleine was born. We found an older home and loved the location, the interior, the character of the home. As we finished our first walk through, our realtor saw this note on the listing notes about the foundation. There had been some foundation repairs but the owners said there was regular foundation maintenance to ensure stability, otherwise it would shift. And the way you kept the foundation in shape was turning a crank about once a month. We found this well-hidden crank, turned it once and I said, 'what's next on the list?'

I'm not living there because I can see the foundation won't withstand high winds, much less a Tennessee thunderstorm. It sounds abrasive when Jesus says, 'I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household⁷.' But those are words of a Savior who offers to save anyone living in a household built on the sandy foundation of lesser loves.

As we meditate on households, foundations, and loves, I'm beginning to see that the foundation *is* **the family story**. In other words, the history of what a family loves. And when you explore the story of what a family loves, you will discover what it does **not** love, too. So here is the way to examine family stories: do you/does your

⁶ Matthew 10:37.

⁷ [*The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* \(Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016\), Mt 10:34–36.](#)

family embrace Jesus as the ultimate love of your life? If yes, next question: do you/ do they embrace his Cross—the way of self-denial, putting the ego to death?

You have to ask the second question, otherwise you can 'have the appearance of godliness' in our households, lacking the power thereof. Jesus said, 'whoever does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.'⁸

This is why Jesus redefines the family. Not everyone in blood kinship will embrace Christ as the ultimate love of their hearts. You may have lived in a household where the Cross was not embraced. But there is no Kingdom without the Cross. You cannot separate the Cross from the Kingdom. Families will be split or saved at the Cross of Christ. There is no other sure foundation.

Ok, this is weighty stuff, but it would be strange if we avoided the weight of Jesus' words today. Let's look to the hopeful words within Jesus' difficult words. 'Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.' As it goes with one soul, so it will be for a family. If a family willingly loses its life for Christ's sake, there they *will* discover the joy of resurrection.

Where egos are laid at the cross of Christ; where self-denial is embraced; where suffering is borne in Gospel, there the Lord Jesus will create a resurrection future for families. He can create a new future for marriages. He can resurrect and rewrite the family story between children and their parents. There is yet hope for adult children caring for parents in the final years of their lives.

But even better than healing and a resurrection future in one family—our blood family—is belonging to Jesus' Kingdom family that transcends space and time. That is our true family and our true home. And we need to know our eternal family and our eternal home because the truth is that, in this life, not everyone we love will place Jesus as the supreme love of their hearts, not everyone we love will kneel at the cross.

You cannot control the decisions of another, but you can choose to remain at the cross. You can humble yourself before the Lord and guard your heart that Christ alone would be your supreme love. You can cry out to Him in prayer for all those you love, that they will embrace Christ with supreme love.

Sometimes the best way you can pray into this ache and this hope is to sing that old Gospel song.

⁸ Matthew 10.38

*I have decided to follow Jesus. No turning back, no turning back.
Though none go with me, still I will follow. No turning back, no turning back.*

You know there's an interesting story behind the words to that hymn. It comes from India, inspired by an anonymous martyr to Christ. The village chief learned of the conversion and asked the new Christian to renounce his faith, threatening him with death. He replied "I have decided to follow Jesus." In response to threats to his family, who also professed Christ, the man continued, "Though no one joins me, still I will follow." His wife was killed, and he was executed while singing, "[The cross](#) before me, the world behind me." The strength of that martyr's faith so moved the village chief that after the martyr's death, the chief said, 'I too belong to Jesus Christ.' With those words *the whole village* embraced the cross and confessed Christ as Lord.⁹

In other words, they discovered a resurrection future, living within a Kingdom family greater than their own tribes. They found firm footing at the cross of Christ. For all tribes and tongues, families and nations find joy and freedom only when they bow before the God whose Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁹ <http://www.ccel.org/newsletter/6/10>