

**Sermon for The Fourth Sunday after Epiphany
RCL Lectionary, Year B
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**The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California**

Business or Family?
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A few years ago I was co-facilitating a diocesan gathering on stewardship. It was a big gathering, maybe forty people, all eager to get ideas for their fall fund raising and pledge campaigns in their parishes and missions. Part of our process was engaging in the theology of stewardship, which meant drawing the entire group into a prayerful reflection on a passage of scripture involving gifts and money – and there are truly a great many of those passages. Our hope was that people would get a taste for the grounding in faith a good parish fundraiser or pledge campaign can have. But afterwards, an old stalwart of one of the diocese’s parishes approached me and pronounced, with some indignation, that stewardship and the business of the church was no place for Bible study or prayer. Business, after all, was business. Full stop.

This story came to mind as I have recently had a number of conversations with several members of this parish who have expressed a heartfelt concern that we are starting to feel more “like a business than a family.” I hear that very deeply. Behind it is a worry that people are getting lost in the shuffle of growth, a concern that recent vestry decisions affecting our staff were less than prayerful. I hear the echoes of old wounds and patterns of hurt that go back many years.

For these reasons, this apparent distinction between business and family in a church setting like ours has given me a great deal of pause for thought and prayer this past week. Because, truth be told, we need both a sense of family and a healthy dose of good business sense in a place like this.

If by business we mean sustaining an institution that serves the mission of building up disciples for Christ Jesus; a place organized and stable enough that strangers and friends both can gather and find support in cultivating deeper life with God; a place careful enough that people are accountable and responsible with the gifts we have received. . . Well, then business, it seems to me, is a good thing for a parish.

If by family we mean creating intimate connections and spiritual friendships that are transformative and life-giving, of embodying Jesus’ Way of welcoming and becoming God’s Family – then being a family is all and good thing for our parish, too.

But there are shadow sides to both, and that is where I want to speak today. I'm well into my third year in this parish with all of you. Some of you have been here for far longer and bear the scars of past church fights, the pain of conflicts not entirely resolved. Being here for this long means I'm getting to know those scars and the dynamics that gave rise to them. That being "family" has at times come into conflict with church "business" says to me we as community are still learning to live fully into the rich and dynamic tension between the two. And it suggests the shadows of both sides have come out here on occasion to do battle, and I hear the concern that we run the risk of that happening again, especially in times as stressful as these.

Church merely as business can sometimes be cold-blooded, like that stalwart suggested when he approached me after Bible study a few years ago. Maybe church was just business for him in the parish he served. But balancing the budget without reference to mission, purpose, or prayer shows a profound disconnect that is not only unhelpful, but also patently un-Christian, or at least it seems so to me. But I suppose applying cold-blooded business sense is easier than living into the ongoing and tricky tensions of sustaining a parish while drawing people into the life of the Gospel. It's easier, too, than living into the spiritual growth that making all difficult decisions in faithful community requires.

Church merely as family carries its own risks too. Church as family can be insular, creating castes of insiders and outsiders. The majority of congregations in the Episcopal Church have 100 or fewer members; many of them are on the edge of death; and some, quite frankly, are going over the edge in the current economic crisis. Most share a common trait that I know too well, because I've served in a few: they cherish a sense of family that says to the stranger, "This is *my* parish. . . not *yours*."

You know the old dynamic. It's very human. We all have the tapes that play in our heads: Who's that sitting in *my* pew? Why is he serving on the vestry. . . I don't know *him*. Even worse, sometimes a feeling of family can tempt us to bring the worst of our family dynamics into Christian community. A good old fashioned church fight can be just like a fight in our family at home: Two or more members throwing reason to the winds and going to battle as they have for decades, with everyone else choosing sides, the neighbors running for the nearest exit, and the children ducking for cover. . .

The great trap for the Corinthians in today's reading from Paul's letter is the same one we face, the same one every Christian community has faced for the past twenty centuries – the trap involves becoming factionalized over a faithful disagreement and looking down our noses at one another. This is why Paul seems to be at pains to spill ink over the eaters and the abstainers. At first it's an alien discussion, perhaps, to us – all this talk about food offered to idols. But at a deeper level, it's the same tug-of-war as ours over whether church is about business or family.

It's always a bit tricky knowing exactly what was going on in the first-century Christian community in Corinth. Like hearing one side of a phone conversation, we get only one side

of the discussion. But from the text, it seems the Corinthians were embroiled in a fight over whether food offered to idols could or should be eaten by faithful Christians. One faction had decided it was fine. . . Why? Because they *knew* better. Idols aren't real. Food is food. The other faction was attempting to purify itself from a polytheistic cultural milieu by abstaining from such food. Why? To maintain their pure fidelity to Christ. Both were conscientious stands, but everyone was looking down their noses at everyone else. As a result, Paul asserts that the community had lost sight of the whole point. . .the whole point of being Christians in community.

Paul offers that they had created a dichotomy based on pride – a dichotomy between those who prayerfully abstain and those who prayerfully eat. Likewise we, twenty centuries later, run the risk of creating in our midst a dichotomy between church as business and church as family. If Paul were writing us today, he might ask us if cold good business sense is always prudent. He might also ask us if a desire to be “family” sometimes tempts us at times to behave like bad families do.

Paul exhorts the Corinthians to stop behaving like children and tyrants; to stop infantilizing each other in a dispute over food offered to idols. To stop getting caught in the ancient trap of pride – the puffing up that knowledge often brings – and instead to give space for one another to grow into what we call in our baptismal covenant “the full stature of Christ.” That means asking the eaters to honor the conscience of the abstainers. That means the abstainers to re-consider the pride of their purified way of life.

And Paul tells them. . .and us. . .there is only one way ultimately to heal the factions: to love as Christ loved us. Love is the operative word here – and not a love for self that freezes out others when they become inconvenient; nor a love that coddles others to the point of perpetuating co-dependency or bad behavior. But a love that invites accountability and growth in faith. A love that seeks understanding and clarification when a decision gets made that is vexing or perplexing. A love that seeks to comprehend a faithfully held difference rather than dismiss it as unworthy. A love that recognizes we are here not only for each other, but for those outside our doors, for those who come after us, and, above all, for a God who made us and calls us to wholeness.

It's this love that I re-commit myself to all of you and invite you to pray into this day. It's this love that is revealed to us in the common cup and the broken bread. It's this love that makes careful, prayerful decisions that lovingly safeguard the heritage of this parish so future generations may know what a Christian family is like. It's this love that throws our doors open, welcoming in the stranger and guest and welcoming the transformation they bring to the Christian family already here: a Christian family where water runs thicker than blood. Where our blood is suffused with the bloodline of Christ, a constantly new and renewed family that is drawing all of creation back together into relationship.

And it's this love, my sisters and brothers, that empowers us to be open to the grace that allows us to be about business. . .the business of the Family of God. *Amen.*