

May 13, 2018  
Seventh Sunday of Easter  
“Summer Fun: Vacation”

All Biblical quotes are from *The New International Version*.



My family on vacation, perhaps Bear Lake in Rocky Mountain National Park, c. 1970's. I'm the oldest child.

When I was a kid, vacation meant a family camping trip. We had a small, pop-up camper, with just enough room for Mom and Dad on one side, me and my sister Claire on the other, and my brother John on the floor in the middle. My Mom was the organizer. She kept meticulous lists so nothing was forgotten—how many pairs of socks, how many cans of Spam, where to stick the hiking boots, and don't forget the Band-Aids and bug spray! We would drive, hike and see the sights all day, then retreat to our cozy camper in the evening, the oil lamp hissing softly and warming the canvas sanctuary as we read, colored pictures and played games. Since we favored the west and the mountains, morning would be frosty. Us kids would huddle in our sleeping bags while Mom got out our clothes and Dad headed out to pump the gas in our little camp stove. A taste of hot cocoa in a plastic cup really hit the spot!

From just the five of us, our family has expanded over the years, and we now require a rental house that sleeps 18. We've been all over.



On top of a mountain in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. To Canada...



We've posed as Civil War-era characters in Wisconsin Dells:



And last summer we were in Estes Park, Colorado.



Recently, we've also gone back to just the five of us...



...gathering for a week in Grand Marais, Minnesota, one of our favorite places on earth. Here we do what the Smicks have always loved to do—read, hike, enjoy the beautiful scenery, and eat!

As I've grown older, I've realized just how important these vacations have been. We have not only been taking a break, but making memories that sustain us as a family. Because of this time together, we have a shared story that is common and particular to us. Most of the time, we are living our own lives with limited interaction with each other; but because of these vacations, there is a narrative binding us together even though we live apart.

I learned from my parents' commitment to vacations that spending time with family has to be prioritized, or it doesn't happen. It requires planning, lists of socks and Spam, and a sacrifice of time, but it's absolutely crucial to building and maintaining the most important relationships we have. My parents showed us that family is foundational to who we are, and to the bonds that sustain us through good times and bad.



The grandkids at Rocky Mountain National Park, 2003 and 2017.

Given how important family is, it shouldn't surprise us that God has noticed; in fact, maybe it's God himself who pointed this out to begin with. We are told in Genesis 2: 21-24:

So the LORD God caused the man to fall into a deep sleep; and while he was sleeping, he took one of the man's ribs and then closed up the place with flesh. Then the LORD God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man, and he brought her to the man.

The man said,

“This is now bone of my bones  
and flesh of my flesh;  
she shall be called ‘woman,’  
for she was taken out of man.”

That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and they become one flesh.

Humankind wasn’t created to be alone—so God created the first family. At the beginning of a new family, two people unite, not just as friends or partners, but so close as to be one flesh. This unity and intimacy then spreads to the larger family, creating ties that bind loved ones together.



My Dad and I near Grand Marais, Minnesota.

Here these words from Psalm 128: 1-4:

Blessed are all who fear the LORD,  
who walk in obedience to him.  
You will eat the fruit of your labor;  
blessings and prosperity will be yours.  
Your wife will be like a fruitful vine  
within your house;  
your children will be like olive shoots  
around your table.

Yes, this will be the blessing  
for the man who fears the LORD.

It's a little patriarchal, but the point is still true: families are a blessing from God.

And from 1 Timothy 5: 8:

Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.



My siblings and I on top of Pincushion Mountain, near Grand Marais.

The context here is a discussion of how to treat widows and orphans. As you recall, without a male head of household, widows and their children (who were considered orphans) had no way to support themselves and no place to live. They were dependent on extended family for support, or if that wasn't available, the charity of the church. To not care for your own helpless family members would have been a tremendous denial of the love and service that Jesus called the early Christians (and us) to. Therefore, Paul (or his surrogate) spoke harsh warnings against this.

What does it mean for us? That family should be a priority in our lives. God has brought us together in families, and caring for each other is our first calling. In some families, human brokenness makes this impossible, and when that happens we can trust that God has compassion and forgiveness, and knows what to do with them; but, families are a gift of God that he expects us to be good stewards of.



Cousins!

One way my family does this is by taking vacations together. Even goofing off together! But your family may have a different tradition. I have a friend whose clan prioritizes family birthday parties for every person, every year. I know someone else whose family does a once-a-month Sunday dinner. Whatever works for you, the gospel calls us to prioritize our families, and soak up the blessings God gives to us in them.





Soup kitchen!

Not everyone has blood relatives they can be close to, but we all have the opportunity to be a part of a church family. Matthew 12: 48-50 tells us:

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.”

He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” Pointing to 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.”

I don’t think Jesus was denying his love and care for his family; rather, he was pointing out that all of us, as the church, are joined together by something even stronger than blood—the power and grace of God. Because of that power and grace, we are siblings, a church family that is called to love and care for each other.



Valentine's dinner.

Ephesians 2: 17-22 gives this family a name:

He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Did you catch that? We are members of the household of God, a family with God at the head, and Jesus as the cornerstone. And not only a family, but joined together as a temple to God. That makes us brothers and sisters in faith and life.



Sisters in Christ looking for bald eagles.

And like any family, we have traditions and practices that keep us close. Sisters in Christ, prayer team, soup kitchen, meals for vets, choir, bell choir, congregational care, Hononegah Road clean up, Sunday school, Bible study, fellowship hour, dinners and special events are more than just things we do. They are also opportunities to grow relationships, so that as a household of God, we are ever stronger together.

You might think that we are too big and too diverse to go on vacation as the household of God, but actually, we do it every week. Every Sunday, when we worship together, we experience a small vacation to the Kingdom of God. That's what worship is meant to be. It is a taste of God's grace among us. The love, compassion, caring, kindness, hugs, smiles and grasped hands we experience right here are a part of the "already" that is God's Kingdom. The gospel of Luke tells us of Jesus (17: 20-21):

Once, on being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, "The coming of the kingdom of God is not something that can be observed, nor will people say, 'Here it is,' or 'There it is,' because the kingdom of God is in your midst."

The Kingdom of God is in our midst whenever we worship him with sincere hearts, whenever we love one another, whenever we join together as the body of Christ with our sisters and brothers.



This is our regular family time, when we come together to celebrate our Father, and also our relationships with each other. It's a time to reconnect from our busy, separate lives. It's a time to grow our bonds of love and friendship. As we come together, we make memories. In this place, we write a shared story that calls us from our separate lives into a mutual past, present and future. And when we do that, we find that our church family is foundational to our lives, a bedrock of care and support that upholds us with the very presence of Christ.

And we get to do it in this beautiful sanctuary, instead of a pop-up camper! You don't need to worry about how many socks to bring, whether you packed the bug spray, or how many ways you can cook Spam. With your brothers and sisters in the household of God, God will provide the grace, smiles and love.