



“The Most Important Ingredient”

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I Corinthians 13*

Stephanie and I are what people in the high tech world would call “late adopters” to cable television, which is to say that we didn’t buy into the whole idea quickly. I grew up in rural Iowa with two—maybe three—TV stations depending upon which direction the wind was blowing, and Stephanie grew up overseas and around parents who thought that the only reason to have TV was so that one could watch the news and Public Television.

Partly as a budget consideration and partly as a lifestyle decision, we never subscribed to more than the minimal number of channels until a few years ago. Then, somehow through a marketing slight-of-hand by the vendor, when we bundled our high speed Internet with our cable TV, we ended up with more TV channels in our package than I could have ever conceived of as a child.

Shortly after we added this “bargain package” to our account, we started browsing through the channels and were amused and amazed at the variety of offerings. At first, we could hardly believe that there was such a thing as the Food Network. We laughed about people who were so desperate for entertainment that they watched other people cook and eat. We’re not laughing any more. It’s almost the only station—despite having 100 or so to choose from—that we can both typically agree on.

If you are a frequent viewer of the Food Channel as we are, no doubt you have seen a show called *Iron Chef America*. For those who haven’t, this show is based on the Japanese TV cult sensation by a similar name. Part of the reason that I think this show captures our varied interests is that it makes a sport out of cooking and eating foods that reflect culinary and cultural fusion. (I like sports. Stephanie’s an anthropologist. We both like to eat. It was a match made in “Hollywood heaven” for us.)

Each week, world-class chefs battle the legendary Iron Chefs of America, including Bobby Flay, Mario Batali, Masaharu Morimoto, Cat Cora, Michael Symon and now Jose Garces. Alton Brown serves as the commentator in Kitchen Stadium, and Mark Dacascos is the Chairman, who welcomes the chefs

and introduces the secret ingredient associated with each show. The challenge that completers face is to create a multi-course meal that incorporates the secret ingredient of the day into every course in a manner that is most pleasing to the panel of guest judges. Oh yes, and they have to complete the challenge in one hour.

The thought occurred to me as I was preparing for today's service that the Apostle Paul, much like the Chairman of Kitchen Stadium, saw his audience in the midst of a challenge—a competition even—and he (Paul) declared that the secret ingredient which his challengers must incorporate into their lives is the ingredient of love.

Paul explained to the Corinthians that love is the ingredient essential to the Christian life, and to all faithful relationships. Hear that? Love is the ingredient that was essential to the Christian life, and to all faithful relationships.

## II

Many of us are aware that we live in a time when some people (still) think that the most essential ingredient in a family is an opposite-gender couple, who are married in the eyes of the state and the church, in which the husband and wife have only been married once, are of the same racial and ethnic heritages, have two point five children, a cat, and a dog, and they live in a single family home with a white picket fence around it.

Those who are sure that the gender, number of adults in the home, ratio of children, or the racial ethnic heritage of the family is the secret ingredient to the perfect family often also believe that the wife and mother in the home should emulate the lifestyle of June Cleaver on the 1950s TV show *Leave It to Beaver*.

Christian ethicist James B. Nelson notes that persons who hold this view are often more interested in one or more of these ingredients than they are in how the people in the household treat each other (55). Nelson describes the idea that *who* is in a family is more important than *how* people treat each other in families as “family fundamentalism.”

In a published manuscript included in the *United Church of Christ Marriage Curriculum*, Nelson explains, “[...] family fundamentalism is based on a romantic view of the 19<sup>th</sup> century family,” or what we would call today, “the traditional nuclear family“ (56).

Today, the so-called traditional nuclear family represents less than 5% of the population in the US. That percentage grows if we include in it the number of married couples in which both the husband and wife work outside of the home. Yet, such family systems still only represent a fraction of American families.

I am intrigued by the fact that family fundamentalists tend to be biblical fundamentalists too, and therefore are more familiar with scripture than many people in our society, and yet their model of family *is not a model that is found in the Judeo-Christian scripture*. Hear that?

The nuclear family model is not found in the Bible. As social historians know, the nuclear family is a rather late social convention and is not found in all cultures. It is rather the product of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Industrial Revolution in Western societies.

Please don't misunderstand me—I am not criticizing nuclear families. I happen to be very fond of them. I spent most of my childhood in a nuclear family, as did many of you. My point is to clarify that that while nuclear families can be models of faithfulness, the nuclear family is not a family model found in scripture, and it is not the *only* model of faithfulness found in biblical or contemporary societies.

Nuclear families are a social construction that emerged during the Victorian era, and something that even in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, only the more economically privileged people were able to participate in. And even then, stay-at-home mothers were not sitting around eating peppermints and bonbons. They were managing their households, which typically included securing provisions for the family, paying the bills, and managing servants and day laborers.

Nelson points out, as have others, that the Bible describes a wide array of family types, some of which include the following:

- ◆ The **patriarchal extended family**, including grandparents and grown sons with their families and servants, such as Abraham's household.
- ◆ **Polygamous marriages** (which included one man with several wives or concubines and children), which are found ubiquitously throughout the Old Testament.
- ◆ **Matriarchal extended families** as illustrated by Rahab and her household that included grown children and their families, and described in the book of Joshua, and elsewhere.
- ◆ **Matrilocal families**, such as the families of Jacob and Moses, who lived for long periods of time with the birth families of their wives.
- ◆ **Single parent families**, such as the widow and her two sons, which are described in I and II Samuel.
- ◆ **Levirate marriages**, in which a brother married the widow of his dead brother, to provide her a place to live, in fulfillment of Hebrew law.

- ♦ **Monogamous heterosexual marriages**, as we infer from phrases such as the “two becoming one flesh,” in Genesis, Mathew, Mark, I Corinthians and Ephesians.
- ♦ **Same-gender companions**, exemplified by Naomi and Ruth, and the two disciples who met up with Jesus on the road to Emmaus.
- ♦ **Trial marriages**, which were expressed sexually, such as the lovers referred to in the Song of Solomon, and the relationship between Ruth and Boaz, described in the book of Ruth.
- ♦ **Adult siblings sharing a home**, as did Mary, Martha, and Lazarus.
- ♦ **Celibate single adults**, such as John the Baptist, and perhaps Jesus and the Apostle Paul.
- ♦ **Christian communes**, like the early apostles, who held all their property in common. (See Acts 2.)
- ♦ **Dual-career marriages**, such as the apostles, Priscilla and Acquilla, described in Acts 18, who traveled with Paul, led Bible studies, and made tents to support their missionary work.

While Nelson illustrates that a diversity of family relationships was considered normative in biblical times, some might say that Jesus’ example and teachings about family ought to be the final word on the subject.

Here again, Nelson reminds us that the Bible provides a more complex view of Jesus and the Christian family than is embraced by family fundamentalists. Jesus was, as Nelson explains, “...a non-traditionalist about family life...”

Based on what we know of Jesus’ life from the gospel, we see that he and his family were refugees, for a time, fleeing to Egypt from Palestine shortly after his birth; that Jesus seems to have spent his adolescence in a single-parent family, since Joseph does not appear in the text after Jesus is 12 years old and that as an adult, Jesus lived as a single adult, rather than pursuing marriage, which was the normative practice for devout Jews.

Nelson goes on to explain that while Jesus taught the seriousness of the marriage bond, he also clearly taught that one’s family of origin must never be absolutized. When the disciples told him that his mother and brother had come to see him, Jesus said, “Anyone who does the will of God...are my mother and my brothers!”

So Nelson shows us that there are *many* different ingredients that can be combined to make a faithful family, but that the *most essential ingredient* is

love—not *who* comprises a family, but *how* people treat each other. *Love* is the essential ingredient that makes family relationships blessed and a blessing to those around the family.(57). Nelson describes the marks of a blessed family and blessed relationships as follows:

1. **Blessed relationships are just.** They are mutual and promote equality and shared power. Justice becomes real when each partner has the power, self-confidence and the encouragement to freely give and freely withhold consent—without coercion, manipulation, or control.
2. Blessed relationships are **self-liberating**. They offer self-fulfillment to all members. They liberate us to become whole human beings, and to be our best selves.
3. Blessed relationships are **other-enriching**. They are generous in their concern for the well-being of the other. They are not manipulative or exploitive. They neither swallow the other up in themselves nor ask the other to become like them.
4. Blessed relationships are **honest and faithful**. They convey truthfulness and free up participants to be who they are called to be. Pretense, evasion, and deception betray the trust on which blessing rests. Fidelity means acknowledging the primacy of the family relationship and all that builds it up.
5. Blessed relationships, among consenting adults, are unapologetically **erotic**. They are relationships which, through physicality and sexuality, lead us to deeper experiences of love and compassion for our partners, ourselves, and our God.
6. Finally, [Nelson says] blessed relationships are **relationships that connect us more deeply with God**. They are relationships that deepen our understanding of the divine, and of God’s fundamental gifts of love, grace, and justice.

Through the individual and cumulative illustrations that Nelson offers of blessed relationships, we are reminded that it is the *quality* of relationships that determines their degree of blessedness—not the number of people in them, not the gender of those who head them, not the gender of those involved, not the number or type of relationships that preceded them, and not the roles played by any of their members. And the most important quality or ingredient of all in any of our relationships—be they as family members, church members, or local or global citizens—is love. Love—not as the secular world would define it—but as Paul describes it in I Corinthians 13.

### III

Over the course of the next six weeks, we have some special opportunities to affirm what we believe about families here at Eden Church. We have several opportunities to demonstrate what we believe about how people should treat each other and about the importance of this essential ingredient that the Apostle Paul called “love.”

I hope that you’ll join Stephanie and me, and invite your family and friends, for one or more of these special occasions that are on the horizon—occasions when we celebrate what we value about families, about our church family, and about the wider community in which we live. These occasions, all of which will be hosted in Oliver Hall, include the following:

1. Our Musical Valentines Family Concert, February 5, 7:00–9:00 p.m.
2. Valentines Luncheon, February 12, 12:00 noon
3. “Love Makes a Family” Photo Exhibit, March 5-7, gallery hours TBD

As we show up for and participate in these occasions, we fulfill Paul’s mandate expressed in I Corinthians 13, and we enjoy the fruits of love that are sweeter than any Valentine that the secular world can cook up for us, during the holiday season or any season of life. Thanks be to God. Amen.