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The family we didn't expect  
Chapel in the Park United Church  
May 10, 2026  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on John 19:23-27

Happy Mother's Day! Well, we've done it. We've said those 3 little words as we do every year. That's how we honour mothers, with 3 little words, right? Shall I wrap this up now? I'm sure that we are all keen to get to our Mother's Day High Tea!

But perhaps Mother's Day is actually worth discussing. Because expectations and the meanings around Mother's Day have certainly changed. During my own lifetime at least. And it's a bit hard to know where to start this story. But I will start with a quote from Apple News recently:

[image: quote below]

“Mother's Day has evolved over the last century as definitions of motherhood have changed to include more people who do not fit into the June Cleaver archetype”. And it's not only that the idea of motherhood has changed. Our ideas of family have changed too.

I want to show you some families. And I wonder which if any of these families you relate to. Which of these families would you want to belong to? And if you did belong to one of these families, which character would you be?

[image: little house on the prairie]

[image: Brady bunch]

[image: home improvements]

[image: family ties]

[image: leave it to beaver]

These images - and our own families - have shaped our understanding of family. My own problem with TV families is that in general they are simply too functional to be realistic. Well that's fine - TV is an escape after all. But as Apple News said, many people balk at the “leave it to beaver” image of family today because their own experience of family is more fractured if not downright dysfunctional.

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The fact is that many - if not all - of us do not live in TV-style families. And that complicates how we celebrate Mother's Day in church. Because I do not want to just spout platitudes about how wonderful mothers are when I know that for some of us, that is simply not the case. For example, some of us have or had abusive mothers. Some of us had mothers who struggled with alcoholism at significant cost to our own childhoods. Some of us grew up in highly dysfunctional families. And platitudes about how perfect mothers are can be very hard to hear for many people. The United Church actually does not name today as mother's day. The United Church calls today "Christian Family Sunday". That is a call for us to broaden our understanding of family, nurturing, caring, and mothering. And I applaud that broadening. Because the society we live in - the actual society, not the one we see on TV - needs all the nurturing and caring that we can get. And our society needs all the nurturing and caring that we can give.

Of course, many of us did grow up in loving caring families, with mothers that we greatly appreciate too. Maybe or maybe not like "Leave it to Beaver". But some of us had mothers that we want to enthusiastically celebrate today. And that's wonderful. Because our complete service - including the music, the prayers, and the Mother's Day High Tea after service will include copious words about wonderful mothers too. And of course everyone is invited to our Mother's Day High Tea after service.

Whatever type of mother you have or had - you are welcome here today.

[image: cat deer]

There are at least 3 different ideas of what "Mother's Day" is all about. The oldest tradition of celebrating mothers that I could find is from Britain. Where starting around the 16th century "Mothering Sunday" was declared to be the 4th Sunday in Lent. The tradition was that on Mothering Sunday, servants were all given the day off to go visit their mothers. This tradition died out by the 19th century. During the 2nd world war American servicemen brought with them their own tradition of "Mother's Day" on the second Sunday in May. And the American holiday of Mother's Day had two separate meanings, depending on how you punctuate the word "mother's".

[image: dog birds]

What we call Mother's Day is either a celebration of all mothers, or of your own

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mother. or perhaps all aspects of mothering. And if that spectrum is not wide enough for you, the United Church - in calling today “Christian Family Sunday” - is also calling us to celebrate our church family. And perhaps the idea of mothering can itself be broadened further into the recognition of family and “kin”. Kin in the sense of whoever we relate to in our lives.

[image: kitten bird]

I said earlier that TV families seem too perfect to be real. That is perhaps what makes them interesting. And of course we all know the rules in TV sitcoms. Every episode has some event that triggers a response. But in most shows, you know that in the very next episode, any lessons learned in the previous episode are completely forgotten. We know the rules for sitcoms.

In any case, I always loved this TV family.

[image: all in the family]

Because the show, “All in the Family” was a depiction of a very imperfect family. And because of all the imperfections, the Bunkers seemed to me to be actually pretty realistic. Growing up I knew a number of families that I thought were quite a lot like the Bunkers. Families that played out the tension between older and newer ways of thinking. Families that played out the tension between outright racism and tentative inclusion. Families where perhaps one person had the most obvious flaws - Archie in this case. But by the end, we knew that every member of the family had issues that they were struggling with. In other words, the Bunker family was made up of actual human beings.

I could imagine being part of the Bunker family. I mean as a fifth character. I did not identify with any particular character. Although if I had to pick I think I would be most like the friend, Lionel Jefferson. But in truth, I’d rather be my own character. But the point is that I can imagine being part of the Bunker family. I would have fit somewhere in that mix.

The Bunkers were not perfect. But they had their opinions and they talked about important issues. They did not shy away from difficult conversations. And along the way they helped each other. In times of financial trouble and personal difficulty. Perhaps they disagreed - they even fought. But there was love there.

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Do you want to see a picture of my actual family growing up?

[image: Addams family]

I'll leave it to you to figure out which character I was. Or which character I still am.

As you dwell on that, let's return to the idea of "Christian Family Sunday". One of my favourite TV families was not actually a family, technically. But it was a group of people who worked together, lived together, and had a common purpose. They acted like family. And their survival depended on their ability to work and live as family together. If you have not yet guessed, I'm talking about the characters on the TV show, Gilligan's Island.

[image: Gilligan's island]

The basis of Gilligan's Island is that a group of strangers are forced together by random chance. They have a common purpose - getting rescued from the island where they are stranded. But since the rescue may take some time, they also put time into living comfortable lives while they wait. So in fact they all share a number of overlapping purposes. Creating decent accommodations, growing adequate food, and even creating their own entertainment. While they wait, either to be rescued - or for the show to be cancelled.

Yes, the characters were caricatures. The wealthy person who only cared about money, along with his unnamed wife. The "egghead" scientist who only cared about his experiments - no matter how often Ginger tried to seduce him. They were all caricatures. Intentionally so. But that was because - let me tell you a secret - "Gilligan's Island" was not a documentary. It was make-believe. But each character brought their own gifts and strengths into the mix. And the family that was formed had a good time. They even crafted some good rescue plans. Always ruined by Gilligan of course. But it was obvious that the characters cared deeply about each other. They wanted the best for each other. They loved each other. They became family to each other.

[image: monkey bird]

In many ways, church families - at their best - are like the self-made family on Gilligan's Island. A church family is a place where people who were once strangers to

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each other come together by the random process of location. We all bring our own gifts and strengths into the mix. And over time we come to know each other. We come to appreciate each other. And we share a common purpose in coming together. Well, we have a number of common purposes. And those purposes all relate to being a community of faith in our own time and place. But we come to care for each other.

[image: bach quote below]

Now I sense that some of you might find this all a bit theoretical. Family is family after all. But families get created in lots of ways. As Richard Bach famously said, “The bond that links your true family is not one of blood, but of respect and joy in each other’s life. Rarely do members of one family grow up under the same roof.”

If I made that statement myself, I would make one change. I believe that your true family may in fact be your blood family. But often, our true family is the one that we construct ourselves as we journey through life.

[image: pig lamb]

Let me share a true story with you. It’s a story about two women who are members of the same church. They both lived alone. One of the women is financially secure - not vastly wealthy. But she is lonely and not a great conversationalist. During church functions, she often sits and listens to the conversation happening all around her, contributing little or nothing verbally to the conversation. She is quite happy to listen, actually. The other woman is financially fragile. But she is a wonderful conversationalist. Not only does she speak feely, but she is interesting, and she takes an interest in the people around her.

I do not remember how this got started - but at one point, these two women decided that they would like to share a meal together once a week. One woman provided most of the conversation. The other one paid for the meal. It was a partnership. Both women contributed what they had to the partnership. Both of them gained something from the partnership. Over time they developed a deep friendship. The quiet person actually became more talkative, especially one-on-one with her new close friend. Over time, these two friends created their own family. Family in the sense of Christian family. Family in the sense that Bach meant - “a bond of respect and joy in each other’s lives”.

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That is a true story, and I'm sure that many of us can think of similar stories.

[image: goat chicks]

Sometimes, a tragedy creates conditions that naturally lead to the creation of a new family. Gilligan's Island is fiction. But what happened on Gilligan's Island happens all the time. Caring for former strangers as you care for yourself. Perhaps because you realize that your future and their future are dependent on each other.

That is what happened in our reading from John 19 this morning. While Jesus is hanging on the cross - dying - he makes a declaration. Jesus declares to his mother that John is now one of her sons. And Jesus declares to John that Jesus's mother is now John's mother. Jesus created a new family between two people who would otherwise have felt abandoned. And that was not done lightly.

Think about it. Jesus is in agony, dying, humiliated. And in the middle of all that he looks down and sees two people he loves, who are about to become devastatingly alone. His mother and John. And Jesus - instead of focusing on his own pain - focuses on the needs of those loved ones.

Moreover, Jesus does not make a vague suggestion, like, "please look after each other when I'm gone". Jesus does not ask them to consider. Jesus declares - "here is your son", "here is your mother". Just a few words, but with the power of love behind these words.

And it worked. The text says, "from that hour the disciple took her into his own home". It was a new family. I'm sure that Jesus, and his mother, and John had been crying. And grief sometimes opens our eyes to new possibilities.

[image: romero quote]

As Oscar Romero said, "some things can only be seen through eyes that have cried." That is exactly what happened to Jesus, and his mother, and John that day. Grief can do that sometimes. Grief and tears can help us receive something we might otherwise have resisted.

Their tears opened a door to new possibilities. New opportunities for caring and love. New opportunities for family. Chosen family is often born from grief and need. Not so often from comfort and abundance.

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[image: cat bird]

In the end, family is not defined by blood. It is defined by caring. And we get to participate in creating our family from the people that God gives us. We can create the family we did not expect.

Jesus created a new family with a few words. At the end of this service our Events Committee has prepared a Mother's Day High Tea for all of us downstairs. What do you think we might create together down there? Let's go find out!

Happy Mother's Day.

*Amen.*