



ELIZABETHTOWN  
CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

PRACTICING PEACE, SERVICE AND OPENNESS TO ALL

*Great God, small screen,  
perfect family?  
Episode 4*

1 Corinthians 13.4–7

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## A VERY SPECIAL EPISODE

During the 70s, 80s and 90s as television sitcoms became edgier and dealt more and more with controversial topics, thus was born the “very special episode.” We knew we were in for a very special episode of a sitcom when the episode started with one of the main cast members breaking the 4th wall and giving a direct to camera message that tonight’s episode would deal with a sensitive topic. How well I remember many of those “special episodes” growing up. I realize I’m dating myself as a child of that era with these references, but some of the ones that stand out were: the *All in the Family* episode where Judith was attacked, the famous *Jessie’s Song* episode of *Saved by the Bell* where Jessie Spano was hooked on pills, and of course the horrifying *The Bicycle man* episode of *Different Strokes* where Arnold and his friend nearly escape being molested by the town bicycle man.

These episodes attempted to be thought provoking and even shocking for the time. Some were more successful than others and many are notable for if nothing else, what felt like some of the strangest moments of canned audience laughter in television history.

So for this morning’s “very special episode” of our sermon series, we are going to be looking at a theme that I suspect will be one that we can all relate to and one that will really hit home—challenges we can face with those we consider family: whether they be our families of origin, our nuclear families, our extended families and even our church family.

Great narratives and storytelling ultimately drive great television. If you are familiar at all with pop culture you know that there is a hugely popular story out there right now. While it is full of larger than life interesting and flawed characters, it has also garnered its fair share of controversy over the years due to its often intense graphic depictions of violence and gratuitous sex. Its plot lines deal with heroes, villains, treachery, murder (at times even mass murder), rape, slavery, incest, torture and whole host of messy topics. At times even the protagonists in the stories are murderers themselves!

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In case you didn't guess it by now the narrative I am referring to is the book that you have in each of the pews. Ha, you thought I was going to say *Game of Thrones*.

But I say this to illustrate a point my Hebrew Bible professor in seminary used to say often—the stories found in the Bible and certainly in the Old Testament or Hebrew Bible can be messy and this messiness reflected real life.

Unlike many of our beloved television shows of the golden era like *Leave it to Beaver* or *The Andy Griffith Show*, many of the Hebrew Bible stories wouldn't fit easily into a half hour episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* with everything being resolved in the end. Many of the Hebrew Bible narratives are left unresolved. I find this to be a great analogy for what real family challenges and dysfunctions can feel like—too often messy and unresolved.

We certainly don't need to look far in the Bible to find plenty of examples of dysfunctional families and relationships: Cain and Abel, Judah and Tamar, the story of Lot's cave, Jephthah and his daughter and certainly the end of the book of Judges. If one didn't know better, the narratives could easily be plot lines on *Game of Thrones*.

It was my Hebrew Bible instructor's view, which I share as well, that many of these narratives were left unresolved to reflect how often times real problems and challenges can feel unresolved and how bad things can get when we as families and communities move away from God.

Now I imagine if we all thought about it a bit, we could come up with at least one person in our families, extended families or even our church family that we find challenging or difficult to deal with at times. And here's the thing, if you really can't think of anyone, then maybe you're the difficult one.

When we were first looking at all the topics we wanted to cover in this series we considered ending with the idea of our global family—how all humans are members of one large family and how Jesus calls us to love our neighbors wherever

they are from. This is a very important and relevant topic especially in this time and is one that we will be exploring much deeper in further sermon series.

In preparation for today, as I began to explore this larger topic, I was reminded that our families of origin and roles we played in them, shape so much of our view of the world and how we relate to it. I also must admit a paradox I found within myself. When it comes to the calling of loving our neighbors, at times I find it easier to understand how to do that with my neighbors from afar than I do members of my own extended family, in particular those that I find to be incredibly difficult to deal with.

Also, as I thought about some of the greatest peace makers and social justice leaders of our time, like Dr. Martin Luther King, and Leyma Gbowee, they too struggled with issues related to internal family life. So staying consistent with my role of the Black sheep of the pastoral family, I went rogue with this sermon and decided to take a closer look inward at families, in all their dysfunctions and challenges.

While I am somewhat kidding about my role in our pastoral family, I find the idea of roles in families really interesting. In Seminary, one of the first things we explore is how our families of origin and our roles in them have shaped our view of the world. In many ways, the roles we were required to play growing up are similar to being handed a script for a role we would play in a sitcom. And sometimes whether we liked that role or not, that's the one we were required to play and if we didn't there were consequences.

There are a lot of different roles one could play in a family and in most cases we don't just play one. As you listen to some of the more popular ones, see if any family members come to mind when you hear these, or if you yourself relate to one or more:

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The hero	The scapegoat
The rescuer	The teacher
Ms. Or Mr. Do it all	The glue
Good girl or Good boy	The helpless one
The go-between	The volcano
The peacemaker	The gossip
The entertainer	The invisible one
The know it all	The silent witness
The sick one	The doormat
The escape artist	The rebel
The standard bearer	The wise one
The lost one	The baby
The therapist	The nurse
The iceberg	Mr/Ms fix it
The nice one	The happy one
The black sheep	The pastor
The successful one	The superstar
The drama king or queen	The favorite
The perfect one	The outsider
The poor little ole me	The fragile one
The strong one	The caregiver
The martyr	The controller
The bulldozer/bully	The matriarch or patriarch
The perfect one	The reverse role parent

As we explore what it means to be Christ in the world, we are wise to recognize that these roles we played in our families have an impact on the roles we find ourselves in today and not only impact our view of the world, but we relate to the world and how we relate to each other.

Family dynamics can be challenging to say the least. At times, it can be easier to deal with the challenges outside of the home more so than the inside, particularly when dealing with those family members we love that struggle with addiction, with physical or mental health issues or any other issues that get in the way of loving as we are called to love.

Our video clip is a great example of this, it's from "A very special episode" of the TV series *Family Ties*. To set the stage,

Michael J. Fox who plays Alex is really looking forward to his Uncle Ned played by Tom Hanks coming to visit. Uncle Ned is a cool fun Uncle. The family is aware that Uncle Ned likes to have a drink every now and then and while this drinking has cost him his last job, it looks like things are turning around, but we will see...

Begin "Say Uncle" Episode of *Family Ties* DVD.

When we think about what defines a family—it is love. Love is what makes a family, a family, regardless of who we are related to. Love is the glue that holds families together, and the absence of love or acting in unloving ways can pull a family apart and leave scars that can last a lifetime.

One of the biggest challenges in dealing with family conflict and dysfunction is making sense of it all. Many only have the context they were born into and naturally find it difficult to see a reality beyond their own. Sadly, many times love has been exploited to be something it is not and has been used as a way to victimize and oppress. In an effort to "open our eyes we can see glimpse of truth God has for us," looking at scripture is a great place to start to see what love is and what a healthy framework is for being a family and community together.

Since God is love and love is the glue that holds all families together, what good news does the Bible give us on love and how might it inform how we deal with and manage what at times can feel like an overwhelming burden when it comes to family?

I find no better scripture to examine than this one:

### **1 Corinthians 13.4–7 (NIV)**

<sup>4</sup>*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. <sup>5</sup>It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. <sup>6</sup>Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. <sup>7</sup>It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*

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While this beautiful scripture is often used during wedding ceremonies, its original audience was for the community of believers at Corinth. These words were to guide the community to place love in the center of the community's reflection as the central to their life of faith.

Paul was writing to the community at Corinth giving instructions on how they should be in loving community with one another, placing love as central to their life of faith. I see no more concise and powerful scripture than this one for how families should express love.

This simple poetic verse gives a powerful summary of how we can love not only our neighbors but each other. Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. In our video we could see that what Uncle Ned was expressing to Alex was not love. Uncle Ned demonstrated the absence of love, impatient, unkind, envious and boastful.

Paul writes, love is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. One more time, love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. Often times we play games in our heads because we think we are loving someone and protecting them by not sharing the struggles we face. But sometimes that's not really love. Love rejoices with the truth. Like it or not, we are a community of believers, the body of Christ together. And we love one another by sharing our struggles with each other.

I had the privilege of being with our youth during National Youth Conference in 2010. One of the things that stood out to me during that time was hearing how, when asked about their home church by others, many referred to our time of sharing during prayer time. What a powerful example of this scripture.

Love is a two-way street that provides a context of mutual-ity, understanding and relatedness between each person and others, between God and believers and between believers and believers. And that is the context in which love enables us,

with the support of others who are linked in love, to bear, to endure whatever comes along together.

In verse 13.7, I find one of the most powerful verses, love always protects. One translation of 13.7 often heard is (in our revised standard version) (Love) bears all things. It is important to note that this translation has been used as justification for victimization throughout history—the idea that love should bear and endure suffering. But the line translated as, “Love always protects,” tells a different story.

Biblical scholar J. Paul Samplly notes that this translation seems to be the most accurate as it balances the idea that while love does not keep score, it doesn’t not call for passing over victimization in silence.

Later in the episode of *Family Ties* we watched, we see that part of what enabled Uncle Ned to continue in his dysfunctional ways was the willingness of the others around him to “bear with him,” minimize his problem and even keep it a secret. Secrecy is dysfunction’s most powerful tool. To hide or minimize one’s challenges and dysfunctions is not showing love. While love perseveres and does not lose hope, it should always protect.

For Paul, love in its purest sense is not achievable apart from the well-being of others. We as a community are called to be there for one another, loving one another, bearing each other’s burdens, protecting each other and persevering with each other.

I am continually reminded of the importance of sharing our stories as an important way of being in community with one another. We all deal with challenges in our families. Whether a family is dealing with physical illness, mental illness, addiction issues, financial struggles or a whole host of their challenges, we can all benefit from being the body of Christ for each other during those struggles.

As I close the sermon and we close this series on God on the small screen, I would encourage us to remember to love one another in patience and kindness. To let go of grudges and

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scorecards, yet to always be vigilant to protect one another. And again, I encourage us all to share our stories and struggles. If you have been gifted with growing up in a highly functioning and loving family with many examples of love, share that story. If you haven't been so lucky, share that story as well so you and others know you're not alone.

I would also remind us that unlike television shows, we don't need to follow a script in our lives. If you've been handed a role and script that you feel isn't where God is calling you, you don't need to follow it anymore, because from here on your script is unwritten.



