

THE WINDOW

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Dear GPC Family and Friends,

In this same space a year ago, I wrote about the difficulties people often face on Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day. Last year I wrote about the puzzling, painful, and difficult relationship I had with my biological mother. She was never much of a presence in my life, and when she died on Easter Sunday, 2017, it marked the end of our troubled relationship. Last year for our May Window newsletter, I wrote about the challenges of Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day when we have estranged relationships in our families. If you would like to know more about what I wrote last year, you can find an archive of newsletters on our church website.

When God places new people and new relationships in our path, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work to bring renewal and love out of pain and hardship.

This year my approach is different and much more grateful as I anticipate Mothers' Day. Many of you will have heard by now that

my step-mother, Sissy Jones, died on April 13, so I have another perspective on "family" holidays this year. In my Easter sermon, I mentioned that Sissy and my dad were married on Easter Sunday, 1973, when I was three years old. I had two older brothers, and we were joined by two step-sisters, as the marriage was sealed on Easter 1973. Easter day was chosen intentionally by these two Christians who were starting a new life and family together. Easter seemed so appropriate for the hope that it brought for all of us. Their wedding was a response to God's grace and guidance in their lives, and they were grateful for all that God was doing to provide for them and their children. Sissy was the mother who raised me, and she adopted me when I was a teenager to seal the relationship between us.

If you come from a "blended family," then you know how wonderful and how challenging they can be. I cannot count the blessings that came to me in my new relationship with my sisters. They were very influential on me, and I cannot imagine my life without them. I have never thought of them as "step" anything. We forged great bonds of love, spent much time together, took many family trips together, and maneuvered through our formative, growing-up years living as a close family. Along the way, however, there were rough moments. New siblings do not always, instantly get along together – especially the older ones. Adjusting to new siblings, dealing with rivalries, facing a new authority figure in a new parent, and sharing rooms and a house (and in those days – one house telephone!) with more people proved very difficult at times. There were tears, shouting matches, shoving matches, and slammed doors – and usually all three in the same day – all through the 1970's-1980's in our house on Cherry Circle.

Through it all, my parents showed patience, appropriate discipline, wisdom, more patience, more discipline, and love. They guided us to grow up knowing how essential family is as we developed healthy relationships within a home. Those healthy family relationships guide us in expanding our relationships with peers and colleagues later in life. I am not exaggerating when I say that so much of my life now was de-

termined by the relationships within my family when I was growing up. When Mothers' Day and Fathers' Day come around this year, I will have a heart full of gratitude for the legacy of good parenting that was given to me. I aspire to be the kind of parent that mine were for me all those years ago.

So you can see that I have both kinds of parental relationships: one very difficult that produced heartache, and one that provided love, nurture, and guidance. From my experiences, as well as much reading and research, I have come to believe that the family is the essential place of nurture and development for every person. I believe that God created familial relationships and that through them, God blesses us more than anywhere else. A healthy and faithful life in adulthood can be traced to the nurture and discipline one receives in infancy and adolescence. Our ability to love and trust is aided greatly in what we receive from our parents from our earliest days. Children need the different kinds of love and guidance that both a mother and father can provide. It is within our families that we learn the most important things about life and faith. The family unit is fundamental to a good community and larger society.

We live in an imperfect world, however, and we often fall short of God's ideal for the family. My own experience reveals how fragile family relationships can be, and many child-parent relationships are like mine with my biological mother, where there is absence and alienation. As my own experience can attest: not every marriage endures, some parents struggle mightily and fail, and relationships break down. I never judge people when marriages struggle and fracture because I know that it happens even to good people and followers of Christ.

But as my own experience reveals: others can step in, offer wonderful familial love, and serve as adoptive or surrogate parents and influential mentors. Out of brokenness, God can provide healing and new life through other relationships – sometimes with step-parents, but also with siblings, aunts and uncles, and close friends. When God places new people and new relationships in our path, the Holy Spirit is powerfully at work to bring renewal and love out of pain and hardship.

At GPC, we want to be the kind of church that equips parents, children, and grandparents to know the blessings of God's love through important family relationships. We also want to be a church that "steps in" for families where there is brokenness so that we can help relationships be healed. We also want to recognize the role that Christian friends and role-models provide for children and youth as they mature.

As these "family" holidays come around this year, I am especially grateful for the blessings of family and the caring relationships that shape us from our earliest days to our last.

Grace, mercy, and peace,

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