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Title: Family Values: The Keaton Family Live Together

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Scripture: [Philippians 2:1-5](#)

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Before Michael J. Fox went Back to the Future, he was Alex P. Keaton on the 80s sitcom *Family Ties*. Family Ties focused on the Keaton family, a good Midwestern family living in Columbus, Ohio. Parents Steven and Elyse, and children Alex, Mallory, and the youngest Jennifer. Steven and Elyse are former hippies, dedicated liberals,

reflecting the cultural liberalism they had grown up within the 1960s and 1970s. Elyse is an independent architect and Steven manages the public television station in town. They still embrace their activist side, in one of the early episodes we see them arrested protesting injustice.

When the series begins, Alex and Mallory are teenagers and Jennifer is a pre-teen. Alex embraces the political conservatism of the 1980s, he's a young Republican, strong supporter of Ronald Reagan and Regan-nomics. he has a picture of Richard Nixon in his room. Mallory and Jennifer are rather apolitical but often get caught in the middle as they try to find their place in their family.

We are in a series called **Family Values**, looking at the intersection of television and theology and what the two together might have to say to us today about our values, in our families, and all of our relationships. When I was sketching out this series and running some ideas past people, a friend pointed out to me that the show Family Ties, aired and set in the 1980s, and the Keaton family, maybe more relevant in 2021 than it was when it first aired. Sure, some of the roles may be reversed today, but this is a family that deals with some deep differences politically. It is a family that struggles to see the world from one another's point of view. It's a family, in the midst of all that could divide them, that deals with some serious issues and the general trials of life. They struggle with how to live together.

Does that resonate with you? One of the things that weigh us down at this time is that everything feels so contentious. Those who we call family, those who we love the most, it feels like we can't agree on anything. The

pandemic limited how we were able to gather over the holidays, over Thanksgiving, and Christmas. I'm guessing that some of us were relieved. Relieved that we didn't have to see that extended family member who we disagree with politically or the one who always wants to argue with us. Maybe some of us were disappointed because we were stuck with a family member whom we don't see eye to eye with or just don't see things the same way. It's often easiest for us to hurt or wound with words the ones we love the most. We often live with the most regret when we hurt or wound the ones we love the most.

In a vacuum, this may feel recent and new. And while some of what is happening around is new, about a third of the New Testament deals with division and polarization.

Paul is dealing with this within the family of the church at Philippi. He loved these people, they were like family to him, one of the very first Christian communities he began. What is happening within this church, within this family of God, is tearing him apart. So he writes to them, saying

Therefore, if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort in love, any sharing in the Spirit, any sympathy, complete my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, being united, and agreeing with each other. Don't do anything for selfish purposes, but with humility think of others as better than yourselves. Instead of each person watching out for their good, watch out for what is better for others. Philippians 2:1-4 (CEB)

I want to be clear, what Paul is writing here is not a plea for cheap unity. It's not a plea to let injustices go unnoticed. It's not a plea to let people believe and live in destructive, untruthful ways. It's not a plea to deny others the fullness of life just for the sake of us all getting along. It's not a plea for unity that is oppressive to others. We have to be careful that we don't miss this, careful that we don't miss the power of this next verse

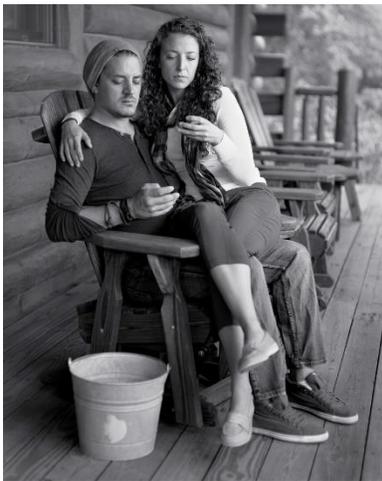
Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus. Philippians 2:5 (CEB)

If you were going to memorize one verse of the Bible, this would be a good one. For one, it's short. These few words also hold enormous life for all of us. "Adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus."

For the last several weeks, we've had a great group of people who have gathered on Tuesday nights via Zoom to watch clips from that week's tv show and dive deeper into their themes and the scripture for worship. One of the things that was noticed this week when watching scenes from Family Ties is that almost the entire series takes place in two rooms. The Keaton's living room and their dining room. Another thing that we noticed is that

there was one television in the house. No one had personal devices, no phones, no tablets. In one scene, Alex even had to physically get up and change the channel on the television. Can you imagine?

I'm not slighting the advances we've made in technology, but what I do want to suggest is that although we may live together, we don't really "live together" anymore. How many times do we find our entire household at home, yet we are all in separate rooms doing different things? How often are we at an extended family gathering and we sit in silence, all on different personal devices? Part of our disunity with one another is that we have become strangers to one another. We struggle to communicate with those closest to us. An example, when couples share frustration or struggles with their significant other, it almost always starts with a struggle to communicate with one another.



Photographer Eric Pickersgill created a series of photos he called *Removed*. He took pictures of people together who were holding electronic devices, but with the devices removed. People are staring at their hands or the empty space between their hands. What is stark about the pictures is the people ignoring their surroundings *AND* the people around them.

I resonate with what Paul tells the church at Philippi, not so much focusing on our differences but what we all hold in common. He quotes what is thought to be an early Christian hymn

Though he was in the form of God, he did not consider being equal with God as something to exploit. Philippians 2:6 (CEB)

Adopt the same attitude that was in Christ Jesus...Embody the Spirit of Christ, think like Christ does, and do what Christ did.

I love what Will Willamon says, "it's a claim of the Christian faith that Jesus Christ makes possible that which the world considers impossible."

Among people of faith, there is this mutual accountability to one another through our shared following of Christ that can transcend that which seeks to tear us apart. It's one of the things that we claim at our baptism, mutual relationship through the Body of Christ.

That's the thing we notice about the Keaton family. Their core family value, despite any differences, is they have one another's back. There is a powerful love in their relationship that brings their family the fullness of life. There is something that sits at the center of their relationship, something grounding them and anchoring them.

In the scene we watched, their Dad, Steven has come home early from a trip. Steven and Elyse had left Alex, Mallory, and Jennifer at home alone. Mallory wrecks the car taking Jennifer over to see her friend. and so Alex has an idea to help pay for the damages. The big game in town that weekend and all the hotels are booked. So he decides to help out his sisters by renting a room or two in the house out for the weekend. The original Air BnB. Well, things go off the rails a bit and Steven is none too pleased with what he finds when he comes home.

The powerful piece of the scene is seeing how the kids have one another's back. They each take responsibility rather than shifting blame or not acknowledging they made a mistake. *Instead of each person watching out for their own good, watch out for the good of others.* Because of their relationship, because of the love they have for one another, there is this obligation (I don't mean that in a bad way) to one another. There is a tie that binds them together that overcomes any differences they have. As a father, Steven can't help but not be mad at them, even though they messed up, he finds grace in the way in which they support and love one another at that moment. He can't help but be pleased with the way they **live together.**

I believe that when we see one another as family, people in the family of God, and we live in a way that enables all to know the fullness of life, that God is pleased.

When we love one another well, watching out first for the good of others, God is pleased.

When we adopt the attitude that was in Christ Jesus, God is pleased.

When we truly live together, God is glorified.

C.S. Lewis- to love anyone, is to be vulnerable.

Fredrick Douglas- without struggle, there is no progress