Human minds tend to be lazy which means that we take a lot of shortcuts when given a new situation. One of the standard shortcuts is to take whatever new piece of information we have and try to make it fit into a category that we already understand. This is not necessarily a bad thing because it allows us to acquire a fair amount of knowledge rather quickly. For example, if we see a new species of tree we can quite reasonably know something about it like it needs sunshine and water. But something funny can happen in regards to this transfer of information when we are dealing with our fellow humans. And that is we don’t assume that things which are true about us can possibly be true about other people. Meaning we might believe that something which is true for people who live in Wisconsin is not true about the people who live in Illinois like the ability to drive or vacation in their own state. This sometimes gets called a negative stereotype wherein we believe that something good about us cannot possibly be true of another group of people and this negative stereotyping is the setup for what happens in the story we have from Acts today. It begins by telling us that Peter is speaking and then we read, “the Holy Spirit fell upon all who heard the word. The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles, for they heard them speaking in tongues and extolling God.”

For a little context, what we hear today comes pretty early in the Christian story. Jesus has died, has risen and has ascended (even though it technically won’t happen until this coming Thursday on the Church calendar). Additionally, this reading happens after Pentecost which won’t happen until the end of the month, but other then that it fits perfectly on the church calendar. So if you remember after Pentecost the disciples head out into the world to tell people about Jesus and the people they are telling about Jesus are mainly Jewish. And while that may sound surprising it really should not be because this was the world in which they would have been the most familiar and comfortable. Furthermore, in many ways, it would have only made sense to them to take their message exclusively to the Jewish people. And the reason for this is that they, the Jews, were the chosen people and so naturally, in their minds, God would continue choosing them. Most likely, they were expecting the whole Gospel thing to be, if not exclusively at least primarily about the Jews. And I don’t think we can blame them. But here is the thing that makes those early disciples so admirable and that is they were willing to have their minds changed. They were willing to look and see what God was actually doing rather than only seeing what they wanted to see. They were willing to leave the negative stereotype that only the Jews could receive the Holy Spirit and realized it could also come on the Gentiles. And to us it sounds rather obvious that Gentiles can receive the Holy Spirt, but for the disciples who were steeped in Judaism this would have been a very big leap. So, my hat is off to them but it also raises a question for us and that is are we following where God leads like the Disciples do this morning or are we treating God more like a Holy concierge who is there to make sure our view of the Church is fulfilled? Here is what I mean by that. If you ask most any church what they want to do the answer you will usually get is that they want to grow and have more young families. But that conclusion is usually reached not by a careful inspection of what God may actually be doing in their midst but rather is reached because the Lutheran church seems to have more cars in their parking lot.

And so, I want to take a few minutes this morning and reflect on what God is doing here at St. John Chrysostom. Put another way I want to ask what has God blessed us with? And just to be clear since Amy says I tell you too often that you are miserable sinners today’s sermon is meant as a feel-good sermon. So here are my observations and they all center around the metaphor of us being a family:

Number One: God has blessed us with love. We have love for God and we have love for one another. At our annual meeting Myra Huth made the comment that, “we are small but mighty,” which I think does a great job at summing up who we are. Pound for pound we are an amazing congregation and I think it all begins from the love we have. No one phones it in. We all do out best to make this place truly special. And we all do our best to love and care for one another.

Number Two: As I said we are a family, which is nice, but the better news is we are not a dysfunctional family. In the opening to Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina he writes, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.” I have never done a study to see if Tolstoy was right but I do think there are certain characteristics that are common in happy families. I have already covered love but I think another characteristic of us being a family is that we try to bring out the best characteristics in one another rather than the worst. Let me explain what I mean by telling you a story about what an unhealthy parish looks like. At a parish I served, which will remain nameless, on my first day a church member came into my office with the church directory and proceeded to go through it line by line telling me various bits of information about each member of the church. Most of the information was pretty banal but some of it drifted into the realm of gossip. Since it was my first day, I did not think much of it since I had lots of other things on my mind. In the weeks that followed she would come in my office when various “concerns” of hers about other members of the parish. Finally, one day after she finished with a history of all the marital problems a couple in the church had had, I told her that she needed to stop this gossiping because it was something that could poison a church. Naturally she took offence and left my office in a huff. If that was where it ended you might be able to say that all was well at the church but it didn’t and that is where the dysfunction showed up. In the days that followed she dramatically quit the church and called numerous parishioners to inform them of how terrible a person I was. Then, I started getting phone calls from parishioners informing me that when she told me things like how much one couple had spent putting in a swimming pool or of a husband’s supposed infidelity that she was just giving me information she thought I needed to know. In other words, the church was a family but what made it dysfunctional was that they covered for each other’s inappropriate actions. I thank God that St. John Chrysostom is not a family that excuses behavior meant to tear down but rather encourages behavior which build up.

The last thing I want to say that is wonderful about us is that like a family we cut across all generations. We have everyone from newborns (due in October) to 97-year-olds. That is what a congregation should be. It should not be all old, all young or all middle aged but rather should encompass all people.

In the coming years I don’t know if we are going to grow or have a giant youth group but that does not matter. What does matter is what God is doing right here and right now. And one of the wonderful things he is doing is creating a family that loves and cares for one another across all generations building one another up so that we may be God’s own this day and forevermore.