

“Family Values”

1 Samuel 2:18-20 (21-25) 26

Colossians 3:12-17

Sermon preached by The Rev. Gaston Warner on December 27, 2009

So, it's the Sunday after Christmas and the lectionary theme for today is the holy family: Did you get to spend a little time with your own extended family this last week? Did you enjoy it? Are they sitting beside you right now? Although I am sure he did not coin the phrase, a friend of mine used to say of his adult children and their progeny returning home for the holidays, “It's good to see them come, and it's good to see them go.”

Our families, like ourselves, are not perfect. This is widely known and so I apologize if it comes as a shock to anyone. We love our families, but they are, it must be said, insane. Families are weird, they are full of weird people, and they are the place in which we are formed. If you think your family is normal, then give it some time and the dysfunction will eventually emerge.

Why then is it that we feel the need to pretend perfection? If you grew up in a trailer park or crowded apartment building where the walls were thin, then the pretense of family bliss was probably not an option—everything was right there in the open. But many of us have thicker walls and so pursuing the illusion of family perfection is an actual temptation.

For some reason the pull to pretend perfection is nowhere so strong as in church. Perhaps it is the Christian call to perfection, “be ye perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect,” that compels us to guard against anyone knowing our very real failings and shortcomings. The problem with such pretense in the church is that it can so quickly turn

into hypocrisy. We begin by simply pretending out of fear that others will judge us, and end up by believing the pretense and actually judging others.

One antidote to falling into this trap is to read the bible. I am continually amazed by two things pertaining to the bible: First, how consistently the biblical writers, inspired by the Holy Spirit, go out of their way to combat this notion of human perfection apart from God; and secondly how fervently we then strive to read human imperfection out the bible. The bible shows us broken individuals whom God uses in powerful ways, and we then try to turn them into superhuman saints without defect, who accomplish God's will by their own power.

Here, I'll prove it to you; you've read the bible, right? Can you name for me a functional family in the bible? We hear so much about Christian family values. Give me one example of a model family in the bible whom you would want to emulate? Just one; Are you having trouble? Well let's do a quick survey:

Adam and Eve were ok, except for the whole introducing sin into the world and one of their sons killing the other son and then trying to cover it up.

Abraham got nervous when travelling in a new lands because his wife Sarah was so beautiful. So when asked he would say she was his sister so that powerful men would not kill him to have her; There was also the fighting between Sarah and Hagar that ended with Abraham banishing his son Ishmael and his mother into the desert.

Isaac (once he got out of therapy from being nearly sacrificed to God by his father) married Rebekah and they had two sons who were polar opposites, and Rebekah and the youngest son Jacob hatched a grand scheme to trick Isaac into giving his blessing to the

younger son Jacob instead of Esau. Even years later, Jacob was perpetually fearful that his brother would kill him on sight if the opportunity arose.

Jacob's father-in-law Laban (who was also his uncle but we will not go there) tricks him into marrying the wrong daughter; and then Jacob in return tricks Laban out of the best of his flocks; and the two sisters bitterly compete with each other for Jacob's affection and esteem; Jacob then shows such favoritism to one of his sons that the others conspire to kill him but end up selling him into slavery instead.

King David, the man after God's own heart, had a little incident with adultery and murder; and he was Israel's best king;

In the **New Testament** we are introduced to Mary and Joseph with Joseph being dissuaded by an angel from having his young, pregnant fiancé dismissed and publically humiliated—Ok so this one is not their fault, but they would not have been up for functional family of the year in Nazareth, I can tell you.

The disciples leave everything to follow Jesus;

And I suppose we can end our biblical family values lesson with Paul's advice not to marry.

Now please do not think that this is family bashing or saying that the bible does not point us toward a moral life, actually the bible calls us to the highest standards imaginable, for we are children of God and created to love God and love each other. But it is critical that we understand that we are not perfect people. We are a people shattered by sin, living in a world shattered by sin, and even our heroes have not escaped its impact. Why is this so important for us to understand? Because only when we fully comprehend our own brokenness can we truly understand our complete and utter

dependence upon God. Alone we do not stand a chance of measuring up, we must depend, daily upon God and those whom God has provided to support us. We love and are loved, and in this community of the family of God we live into God's kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. Why does the bible go so far out of its way to show the brokenness of its saints? Because they, like us, were completely lost without God; but with God and each other, we can live into the perfection to which we are called.

But here is the problem, as much as the bible strives to teach us this simple, yet elusive lesson, we work hard to cleanse the bible of all these indelicate imperfections. We don't have to look any further than today's OT lectionary reading for an example. The lectionary theme for this week is "the Holy Family", and the people putting together the lectionary are clearly trying to give us pictures of children being raised to serve God.

So let's look at the 1 Samuel reading for today—Now I find this fascinating, you may not care—The first lectionary reading is from 1 Samuel 2:18-20 and 26; Let's read it; (it is found on page 235 in your pew bibles). Now, just so you know what is going on. Elkanah and Hannah are married but Hannah is barren; so she prays to God to give her a son and when this happens she dedicates the boy, named Samuel, to God and takes him to the temple to serve under the head priest Eli; now Eli has his own sons, but we will get to them.

Let me read the first lectionary section—I'm adding vs 21 to the lection because they just left it hanging out there: **Read 2:18-21**—that's a nice picture isn't it; now the lection skips us over to **vs 26**—also very nice;

Now let's read the part they skipped—vs22-25; well now that is not so nice! Not very Christmassy!

I can well imagine the lectionary committee thinking that middle bit would spoil the glowing picture they were putting together of a holy family and distract us from their point. And it does distract us, the problem is that it changes the story entirely if we do not see the bad with the good and the way that God is at work in the stuff of our lives—both the good and the bad—to bring about our salvation. All of us are broken and we live in a world shattered by sin; the whole point of Christmas is that God understands this and has, in Jesus Christ, entered our brokenness to bring us to wholeness. If we do not first recognize our own sin and need of God then we cannot enter into the healing that God desires for us. We cannot do this thing called Christianity on our own, just like Abraham, and David, and Paul could not do it on their own. We need God, and we need each other.

So what does God's healing look like? Our final lectionary reading from today, Colossians 3:12-19 let's us in on a vision of wholeness, of a people who know their need of God and each other—it is the secret of a joyful life. Don't turn your bibles to this one, it has a problematic verse just after our reading that we don't have time to get into; I'm not even going to give you the page number.

This is a passage often read at weddings because it talks about love and relationships—although it is not speaking about romantic love or even biological families particularly, instead it is teaching us how to live together as Christians more generally; how to live as the family of God: Colossians 3:12-17.

This is the high calling to which we are called. This is what it means to live together as a family—not related by any blood, but the blood of Jesus Christ our Lord. For our family is defined by our faith and not our birth. This is God's version of family

values and they are for the family of God. In the bible we are shown broken people who God chooses to reveal his kingdom. And these are people like you and me.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.