

New St. James Presbyterian Church
Sunday, June 21, 2020
Rev. Mark McLennan

“FAMILY MATTERS”

Scriptures

Genesis 21:8–21

Romans 6:1b–11

Matthew 10:24–39

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Families – They are complicated

My dad was, in effect, Archie Bunker – An overtly racist, homophobic, misogynist. He even looked a little like Archie.

He had redeeming qualities as well, but his default approach to life was pretty much the same as Archie.

My mum was kind, generous, and she tried really hard to help others, in every area of life, every chance she got

Both were hard-working and did well in life, with limited opportunities.

Their children are all educated, and have used their skills well.

But we never were, and are not now, a close-knit family.

On the other hand, Susan’s family are extremely close-knit, in many ways.

Even though we have no children, we have always found “*family*” in the congregations we served, and we are still close with people across the country.

Today’s scriptures have lots of “*thought-meat*” on a variety of topics:

Discipleship, union with Christ, God’s ongoing presence with us, and the foundation of the people of Israel and the origins of Islam.

One can find lots of articles, opinions, and sermons about each of those topics.

But, in this time, in this place, under these circumstances, in today’s context, the theme that jumps out at me is – **FAMILY**, [And not necessarily in a good way]

Consider the lesson from Genesis – the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac.

This is not a happy story in many ways.

Abraham didn’t have a son and heir – Sarah had not been able to give him one. And they were old – far beyond the age of having children.

So, Sarah gives Abraham a concubine – their slave girl Hagar.

Hagar and Abraham get together and produce a son – Ishmael.

In the meantime, Sarah had given birth to her son Isaac – “*laughter*” is his name.

Abraham is delighted, but Sarah is jealous and viciously angry.

So, she tells Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness – and he does, because God told him to listen to Sarah and do as she wished.

Remember – **this was all Sarah’s idea in the first place!!**

Isaac becomes one of the patriarchs of Judaism, and Ishmael becomes the patriarch of Islam.

Jews, Muslims, Christians – we all come from the same place.

We are all part of what are called “*Abrahamic religions*”

We are all faith-related.

But that has not prevented believers in each of those faiths from committing horrendous acts of racism, hatred, and destruction, for millennia.

Families are complicated.

Now, take a look at today’s Gospel lesson from **Matthew 10**.

This is a series of challenging, if not strange, teachings by Jesus.

He talks about the disciples’ mission, discipleship, human worth, “*have no fear*” [as long as you believe in Jesus and follow him], *God is with you* [as long as you believe].

Then he goes into this mini-rant, in my opinion, about family.

For example:

"Everyone who acknowledges me before others I will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven" (10:32).

"I have come not to bring peace, but a sword" (10:34).

And then he starts in on family members.

Nobody will get along – children and parents, in-laws, anyone, and everyone in the household

He wraps it up with:

"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me" (10:37).

In Jesus’ world – ***families are complicated*** - because of Jesus!!

Then he finishes up with:

"Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it" (10:39).

How do these words connect to what we are seeing, and experiencing, right now?

- Families separated because of the lockdown.
- Families unable to say goodbye or grieve, because of the lockdown
- Families destroyed by the actions of overzealous police officers, and right here in our own country, lest we feel smug
- Families split apart, by politics, or religion or other choices or personal preferences or by just being who you are.

Families are complicated

– by so many issues and thoughts and opinions and realities

An example from The Rev. Dr. Dan De Leon:

Not long ago, I attended a meeting that was open to the public at Texas A&M University.

A student named Levi was presenting on his experience with reparative therapy and his research of so-called ex-gay ministries.

To a room of roughly 50 people, Levi talked about being raised in a Christian home, being actively involved in his church's youth group, and devoting his life to following Jesus.

Levi said that when he came out to his parents, they made him attend camps where the young people were told that they needed to stop being gay or they would go to hell.

At one of the camps, someone Levi knew committed suicide and another attempted the same.

Levi initially tried to be straight, but the more he noticed his camp counselors and peers alike struggling to maintain a façade, the less he could believe that Jesus would condemn him because of who God made him to be.

When reparative therapy failed to change Levi, he suddenly had enemies in his own household. His parents kicked him out.

Somehow, Levi was able to finish high school and then get into Texas A&M.

Levi's brother also attends A&M, but when they cross paths on campus, Levi's brother still won't acknowledge him.

During the Q&A, someone asked Levi, *"After all that, do you still identify as a Christian?"*

I heard his answer as a powerful confirmation of Jesus when Levi said, *"You know, when I came out to the people at my church and they disowned me, that was really tough. Losing that community was tough. But, yes, I am a Christian."*

Here was the testimony of a young man who knew suffering, who knew about family turning against him, who knew about life as he knew it dying; yet in the face of it all, he never forgot the instructions of the one he continues to follow: *"Have no fear."*

Here was a disciple of Christ;
and although we weren't in a church building, Levi had taken us to church.

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Dietrich Bonhoffer's classic book "The Cost of Discipleship" comes to mind.

As Kathryn Schifferdecker writes:

These are hard words. *Take up your cross? Lose my life?*
That's not what I signed up for.
I prefer Jesus' sayings about *having life and having it abundantly*.
But perhaps these sayings are not mutually exclusive.
What if the abundant life is the life we find when we take up the cross and follow Jesus?
What if that is our real and true life?
What if a life lived in self-interest is a life already lost?

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John Petty adds:

Regarding these difficult sayings about family, Matthew's fundamental message is that, contrary to our own assumptions, we are people being formed by the future, and not the past.
...The kingdom of heaven is coming, a kingdom in which all relationships will be relationships of equality, not hierarchical, as in a family.
...To be dominated by one's family is to be dominated by the past.

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I understand what Petty is saying.

I have spent a significant portion of my life overcoming what I was taught and learned as a child and teenager.

I am still a work in progress, I am still working at it.

The events of the past two weeks have forced me to revisit that personal progress, in an important way.

I hope Kathryn Schifferdecker is correct.

I have spent much of my life taking up the cross and following Christ.
I hope I have served Jesus and God's Church faithfully.

I have certainly found abundant life in that journey.

And the journey of formation continues – for me, for the Church, for our country and for our world.

IN THE NAME OF THE CREATOR, MESSIAH JESUS, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT... AMEN.

Matthew 10: 24-39 - comments

"I often wonder what the lack of persecution in my life says about how little I have actually taken up my cross. (10:38) And each time I wonder about this, I am fearful." [Andrew Prior]

"Fear can control our words and our actions.

It should not control the actions for those who trust God." [Brian Stoffregen]

Stewardship Quote

The measure of a life is not its duration, but its donation.

Peter Marshall (1902-1949), Scots-American preacher

PRAYER OF APPROACH

Loving God, you call us to turn away from our own selfish interests, to take up our cross, and to follow you.

To find our lives, may we live them in service of your mission.

As we come before you this morning, give us open hearts and open hands.

Make us eager to hear your voice and seek your guidance.

Open our minds to your ever-present spirit that is always moving within and around us.

Forgive us, O God.

Cleanse from us every unworthy thought, word, and deed with the grace of Christ our Lord.

Rouse us by the Spirit to be intentional, courageous disciples even when the world does not welcome us, or the word we proclaim in Jesus' name

Open our spirits to your nudging and open our lives to your love.

We are sinners... we are not only sinners

We are weak...we are not only weak

We fail... we are not always failures

We have destroyed...also we have loved

You, God, do not limit us to the stories by which the world knows us.

You see much more in us than the labels we give ourselves

Give us courage to defy all expectations – especially our own – and in your love become all of who we are. Amen.

ASSURANCE

Know that God loves you and forgives you.

Do not be afraid to make a new start!

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE

God of compassion and courage,

In our weakness you are strength. In our darkness you are light.

In our sorrows you are comfort and peace.

Embrace each situation we remember in our prayers this day with your steadfast love.

We thank you for moments of joy that still break into our lives, even in the strange times of pandemic and re-opening of our communities:

for love given and received, for friends who furnish our life with meaning and happiness, and for family who embrace us with love and understanding.

We thank you for all caring and faithful fathers celebrated this day, remembering those whose fathers have died and praying for those fathers cut off from their families.

God of the nations, we pray for our country and countries around this world so deeply affected by COVID-19.

Guide leaders to make wise decisions about reopening communities and give patience and courage to those whose lives have been disrupted, especially those who fear what the future holds.

Wherever injustice rules and misinformation confuses, protect the vulnerable and shine the light of your truth to reveal the path to justice and renewed hope.

WE PRAY TODAY FOR:

The families of Rodney Levi, Brady Francis, and Chantel Moore

Police officers and those who lead them, everywhere

Leaders of provinces, states, and nations, that they may be wise and act responsibly for the good of all

All those whose lives have been impacted by disease, disaster, or despair.

Surround all these, your children, with your love, and support them with the strength of your Spirit.
Open our eyes to see how we might bring comfort to those who are hurting.

God of the impossible, we pray for justice, peace and reconciliation;
When the challenges seem too many, remind us of your resurrection power;
When the task seems overwhelming, remind us of the miracle of love;
And when apathy threatens us, remind us of your vision of a world made whole.
Help us to hope that the impossible can happen, and live as if it might do so today.
And now we pray together in the words that Jesus taught us to pray:

The Lord's Prayer

BENEDICTION – from William Sloane Coffin

*"The Lord bless you and keep you,
and the Lord's face shine upon you
and grant you grace;
grace to risk something big, for something good."*