

The Definition of Family

*a sermon by The Rev. Scott Dalgarno preached on June 25, 2017
based on Matt. 10:34-39*

Jesus' life and teachings challenge so many of our assumptions. For example, he challenges our notions of respectability. He was open and welcoming to outcasts and sinners and un-respectable people. He had harsh words for those in the most prestigious positions of religious and political leadership, calling the Pharisees "white-washed tombs," and King Herod "that fox." I imagine, though, that if Herod knew he was thought of as a fox he might have enjoyed it.

Jesus also challenges our notions of power. It was expected that someone speaking of a coming "reign of God" would usher in a violent revolution; he would bring back something like the reign of King David, for instance. Instead, Jesus suffered humiliation, accepting a scandalous death.

Jesus also challenges our notions of family loyalty, teaching in today's text that following him was going to pit some family members against others. Pretty disturbing. Let me set the background of that here.

Days or weeks before he shares this disturbing teaching he had called into being a new community of faith and chose members to serve as the core of this community, the twelve disciples.

Then Jesus and his leadership team head to Jesus' hometown of Nazareth. Here there is a moment of celebration followed by a serious conflict. The very people who should have best understood and most joyfully welcomed this new prophet of God don't understand him.

"People were saying his teaching is too hard. 'He has gone out of his mind'" (Mark 3:21).

That is when Jesus' mother and brothers go to Capernaum, to take him away and straighten him out. When Jesus is told that they have come, he asks rhetorically, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Jesus looks at those who are with him, "Here are my mother and my brothers!" he says, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

These words of Jesus are disconcerting. But in another way they are radically inclusive and liberating.

They are troubling because they seem to be directly counter to the teaching of the Law. The fifth commandment says, "Honor your father and your mother" (Exod. 20:12). There is also a warning about this in the book of Deuteronomy:

“If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother . . . then his father and his mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, ‘this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death.”

Kind of an extreme solution, don't you agree? I think Jesus was just making a point that his kind of community may matter even more than birthright and family ties. This is the type of new thinking the apostle Paul speaks of when he says, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”

Jesus is trying to totally redefine all relationships, including family, in terms of living under God in a broader community than just narrow family.

Well, the last fifty years has seen a tremendous revolution in what it means to be a family. In the mid 1980s, The Cosby Show used to be our window on family. It's kind of difficult for those who grew up in those days to consider that now, isn't it?

In any case, today we have blended families, patchwork families, adoptive families. We have families that skip the parent generation entirely, where there are just grandparents and grandchildren.

We have nuclear families that live in separate houses, as well as divorced families that nest together in the same house. We have families with one parent, two parents, half a dozen parents in some cases here in Utah and the Mormon west, and some families with no parents at all.

Jesus knew how powerful families are in our lives, whether they are working well or not at all, whether we have snuggled down deep in the bosom of them, or whether we are terribly estranged . . . or somewhere smack in the middle.

The 1st century Palestinian family Jesus was familiar with was often quite large and extended in interesting ways. It consisted of a father and all his children, including his married sons and all their families, and they would all be living in one place – one dwelling, if possible.

I've mentioned in a previous sermon that the ideal marriage partner for you, if you lived then, would be one of your first cousins. This would bind an already close-knit family even more tightly together than previously, which, of course, is the point of marriage at that time. The resultant mentality is, “Our family against every one else's.”

So, to marry anyone other than a family member was unthinkable. To sever all family ties the way the prodigal son does in Jesus's parable is not only stupid it is tantamount to suicide. Outside the family no one can be trusted. No one will help you do anything. That's what the renegade son finds out when his inheritance runs out.

So, you can see why Jesus's remarks about dividing family members was unthinkable. What we need to understand in order to grasp his attitude is the nature of the person who attended Matthew's church and who heard this teaching. In most cases they were men and women who were already estranged from their families.

In Roman times, it was the custom of whole households to adopt the faith of the head of the family. Everyone in the family was compelled to follow the lead of the leader – spouses, children, servants, everyone – so if one of the underlings in the family decided to become a Christian it was nothing short of mutiny. Especially since becoming Christian had all sorts of consequences.

It might mean beginning to associate with a whole new lower class of people that included outlaws and slaves. It might mean bringing the whole household under the scrutiny of the local magistrate from the Roman Empire.

There were plenty of people sitting in Matthew's congregation who had already been shown the door by their families for following Jesus. Some of them were Roman soldiers. So when Matthew told them what Jesus said about hating their families it did not frighten them (as it does us).

They found comfort in those words, just as they found new family among the others sitting around them, **ESPECIALLY**, when they heard **THAT PASSAGE** read that we heard read this morning.

It was as though Jesus had known what would happen to them and reassured them, ahead of time.

We live in a different world today, but we still have a deep genetic desire for kinship. Some of us find this in our families and some of us do not. For some, the support we need to survive comes from people on the outside of family.

So, it's true that church exists in no small degree to take up the slack in a world where we move about so much, or are separated from family for other reasons.

Statistics say the church is a shrinking institution, but a church that tries it's best to be like Matthew's church is more important now than ever. So, we need to be open to new ways of defining family.

But let me say that the church **also** exists to do what we can to help the many traditional families who are the core of our congregational life. Their lives are often just as fraught as anyone else's. Times are tough.

With that as my goal right now, I'd like to pass on to you the best advice I know for enhancing family togetherness and belonging. It comes from a book called, *The Secrets of Happy Families* by Bruce Feilor. In that book he takes on many challenging subjects, including the difficult issue of the family dinner. Here is what he says . . .

It is like the big bogeyman in families today ... Everybody has heard that family dinner is great for kids. But unfortunately, it doesn't work in many of our lives.

Well, guess what? Dig deeper into the research and it's very interesting. It turns out there's only 10 minutes of productive conversation in any family dinner. The rest is taken up with take your elbows off the table and pass the ketchup. And what researchers have found is you can take that 10 minutes and put it in any time of the day and get the benefit. So, if you can't have family dinner, have family breakfast! Even one meal a week, on a weekend, has the same benefit.

And it turns out in many ways that what you talk about at these times of togetherness is even more important than what you eat. Researchers at Emory University gave children a 'do you know' test. Do you know where your grandparents were born? Do you know where your parents went to high school?

Do you know any member of your family who had an illness or something terrible that happened to them that they overcame? Children who scored highest on the 'do you know' test had higher self-esteem and a greater sense of control over their lives.

[In fact] the 'do you know' test was the single biggest predictor of emotional health. If you tell your own story to your children — that includes your positive moments and your negative moments, and how you overcame them — you give your children the skills and the confidence they need to feel like they can overcome some hardship that they've felt.

The family story that we, in my family, are most proud of is the story of a cousin of mine who is now 87. She's more like an aunt, really, and I go out to Sacramento to see her a couple of times a year. Without going deeply into her story I will just say that, at the age of fifty, living in a jungle in one of the regions of the Amazon River, she lost her husband and only child, a daughter, to a terrible strain of malaria, a strain which she also contracted and survived.

Then, all alone, she survived for 5 more months until those who regularly supplied the family with staples, found her, having been unaware of her plight. I will add to that that she was legally blind and legally deaf since childhood.

My daughter grew up with that story as an assurance that there was a vital strength in our family line, and people to be fiercely proud to call your own.

What stories do you tell your progeny about your ancestors? It's an important question. It doesn't have to be a story of survival, of course, to be of help give a sense of belonging to a family. It might just answer the question, "What were grandma and grandpa like when they were children?"

With that in mind, consider the following story told in a poem called, *A Family History* by Julia Kasdorf :

At dusk the girl who will become my mom must trudge through the snow, her legs cold under skirts, a bandanna tight on her braids. In the henhouse, a klook pecks her chapped hand as she pulls a warm egg from under its breast. This girl will always hate hens, and she already knows she won't marry a farmer.

In a dim barn, my father, a boy, forks hay under the holsteins' steaming noses. They sway on their hooves and swat dangerous tails, but he is thinking of snow, how it blows across the gray pond scribbled with skate tracks, of the small blazing fire on its shore, and the boys in black coats who skate hand-in-hand round and round, building up speed until the leader cracks that whip of mittens and arms, and it jerks around fast, flinging off the last boy. He'd be that one—flung like a spark trailing only his scarf.

Let me share one more family story; this one has some moral heft to it. Four years ago, I went to our downtown library to hear Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, he spoke of his grandfather that night, but the most memorable story he told was actually from his own youth. Here is how Arun Gandhi told it:

Arun's father was the son of Mahatma Gandhi, and he raised Arun and his other children in South Africa where he worked for justice in the Mahatma's name, using the Mahatma's moral techniques.

Now, when it came to disciplining their children, Arun's parents raised their children using acts of penance for leverage. They would fast for the misdeeds of their children. If the children misbehaved, the parents would sit with them at dinner but not eat. Arun said it worked. Watching his parents go to bed hungry had a huge effect on him.

Well, one day when he was 16, his father wasn't feeling his best but he had an all-day meeting in the city of Durban and needed to go anyway so he asked his son to drive him.

Arun was glad to. His father made a list of things Arun was to do in the town (18 miles from home).

The ashram where they lived was boring for a 16 year old – and it stood alone in sugar cane fields with nothing between them and the city, so any excuse to get to go to the city was thrilling for this young man.

Well, Arun dropped his father at the hotel where he had his meeting. Arun quickly did the things his father asked him to do including taking the car to be serviced. After that he went to a double-feature John Wayne western program. He was totally engrossed. It let out at 5:30 pm, but he had agreed to pick his father up at 5pm. So when he collected the car and his father, his father, who had been pacing worriedly in front of the hotel, asked his son where he had been.

Arun said the car was late in being serviced so he had had to wait for it. But his father, who had called the garage, knew this was not true. So he said to his son, “There must something wrong in the way I brought you up if you aren’t comfortable enough with me to tell me the truth about such a thing.”

So as penance his father walked home – the entire 18 miles. Arun said it took until midnight for the two of them to get home. He crept along, driving the car behind his walking father, shining the headlights on beyond him so his father could see to walk in the pitch dark. Arun said he had to watch his father suffer the whole way home and determined never to lie again.

He said he remembers it as if it were yesterday and it has been over 60 years.

A story like that, told with tenderness and genuineness can make a tremendous difference in a family. You don’t need to adopt the strategy or even like it, but it stands like a rock that says, raising our children to tell the truth is paramount.

In a world like ours where telling the truth is becoming less and less valuable to many, it could make a difference.

So, as we close, take a minute and think of a story from your family that goes back a generation or two or three, perhaps. Have you told it to your children, or is it a story that was handed down to you from above?

When you have that in mind, turn to your family members, if they are with you, or to one other person near you in the pew, and share your story.

Amen