

Jesus and the Family

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 4th Sunday after Pentecost, July 1, 1990. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 32:22-32; Romans 6:3-11; Matthew 10:34-42.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Maybe you've noticed that some people prefer not to talk about their families. Young parents are often eager to tell you about their newborn child; there's a special sparkle in their eyes whenever they get on the subject. New grandparents, too, like to tell you about this special little person who got to be the most delightful person in the world. But sometimes, among people whose own children are pretty well grown up and among grandparents whose grandchildren have perhaps gone through a divorce, there's little inclination to talk about their families, their eyes glaze over and their replies are vague and evasive.

The reason for this is that our families can often be a source of pain. There are family pleasures, of course, that you can't duplicate in any other area of life- the surge of pride you feel, for example, when your children graduate from high school or college; the warm glow you feel when your children are able to talk freely about their love for you; the special expression of kindness and appreciation you feel from a child or your spouse. But there can also be a great deal of pain- for example, when you watch your children make mistakes that you can't do anything to stop; when you'd desperately like to help them but you can't; when injury and death invade the family circle. So, sometimes, when you bring up the subject of family with those you know only casually, you discover that some of them would prefer to drop the subject. *Nederhood, Family Misunderstanding*

"Sometimes a one's enemies will be the members of one's own household," Jesus said. That's a painful reality in many families. The family is becoming a place of danger for millions of children who're being

abused by their parents. Child abuse can take many forms with sexual abuse the most feared and sickening. Recent statistics show that 25 percent of females in the United States have been severely abused by the time they are sixteen; for males the statistic is 20 percent. A poll taken in Christian college among 247 women showed that 96 of them had been abused. Experts say that most of the abuse occurs in the home. J. Nederhood, Love and the Family

Horrible crimes are being committed within the family these days. Child abuse cases and fatalities that result from them are at an all time high. Government agencies are overwhelmed by the need to refer more and more children to foster homes and social agencies for care. We're all aware that aside from the glaring cases of family breakdown that require police intervention and assistance from public agencies, serious family problems can plague even the best households. Nederhood, Household Love

But sometimes its one's faith in Christ that sets a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. Sometimes we make enemies against our will when we take a stand for Christ and Christ's kingdom.

When we think of a family most of us still think primarily of a mother, father and a couple of children. In North America, at least, the family is basically nuclear, private, and relatively child centered.

But when Jesus said that his followers must love him more than family, the family meant something different. The family included three or four generations living together often under the same roof with the oldest male as the head of the family. The family wasn't a private refuge but a very public institution. Families lived more fully in communities than in individual homes. When Joseph and Mary went to Jerusalem when

Jesus was 12 years old they didn't go as an individual family but as an extended family with many cousins and aunts and uncles. That helps to explain why Mary and Joseph didn't miss Jesus for three days after they left for home. They just assumed that he was with his extended family. And in this kind of extended family decisions were made in community with the head of the family making the decisions about the most important things in life such as religion. It was unheard of in those days for individuals to choose their own religion as we do today as though we were in a cafeteria.

You can imagine, therefore, the conflict that arose when men and women declared their faith in Jesus as God's Messiah and decided to follow Christ.

Harvey Conn was a missionary in Korea for many years where the family structure is still much the way it was in Palestine in the days of Christ. A young teenage girl from a Confucianist family began to attend his Bible study. Eventually she came to Harvey and asked to be baptized and confess her faith in Christ.

Harvey was faced with a dilemma. He knew that if that girl confessed her faith in Christ her family would turn against her. And yet he remembered the words of Jesus and how loyalty to Christ and his Kingdom transcends even family loyalties.

The young woman lived in an extended family containing four generations of which she was the youngest. So Harvey, trying to deal with his dilemma, went to the woman's great grandfather, the head of the family. He spoke to him with the utmost respect. He explained how his grand-daughter had been attending his Bible study and now wanted to confess her faith in Christ and be baptized.

"But", Harvey, said to the old man, "I don't want to do this without speaking to you as the head of the family and explaining what this means and hopefully receiving your blessing to do this. She loves you and her mother and father and respects her ancestors but I know that if she makes this decision on her own her whole family will be against her."

The old man listen thoughtfully and then said, "We will talk about this in our family."

Several days later the old patriarch sent a message to Harvey inviting him back. "We have talked about this in our family and we want you to explain more fully who Jesus is and the meaning of baptism."

Harvey explained that Jesus is God's own son who died on the cross to forgive our sins and to gather all people into the family of God. In baptism we die to our old life and our old loyalties and Jesus Christ becomes the Lord of our lives. We're given a new name and enter the family of God.

The old man sent Harvey away. Days later he received another message from the patriarch to visit a third time. "Our family has thoroughly discussed the issue of who Jesus is and what baptism means and we all want to be baptized and confess our faith in Christ and belong to the family of God."

I don't imagine we'll ever understand that concept of the family, we've become so radically individualistic. In our culture, not even the family has the central value. Self and self fulfilment has become the primary value for many Americans.

I think of a story that Garrison Keillor tells. Byron Tollefson was so proud when his son went off to college, the first Tollefson ever to go. Byron had worked hard on his dairy farm for this. At the end of the first semester his boy came home for a two week break. Early the next morning,

before sunrise, Byron knocked on his boy's door to help him milk the cows just like he used to do before he went away to college. His boy said he didn't feel like it.

"What's wrong, son, you sick?"

No, the boy said, he felt depressed and he just needed time to find himself. Byron was baffled, dumbfounded, shocked.

"Find himself! He doesn't have to find himself. I can tell him where he is." Byron didn't know what finding oneself had to do with forty Holsteins that had to be milked and the stalls cleaned and the feed put down. He didn't see how depression entered into the picture at all. "If I had ever said that to my dad, he woulda walloped me one upside the head, given me something to be depressed about."

We live today subject to the curse of rugged individualism. To thyself be true. Even the family is seen as just one of many things which exist to bring us self-fulfillment. Too much centers on what I can get out of life. "Give me a comfortable home with a lovely wife and happy children. Throw in a dependable car, good health, an adequate salary, and I can live pretty well. The church is important because I always feel so much better when I go. It gives me so much peace. If something goes wrong with my house, my wife, my children, my car, my health, my job, or my religion, I want a quick fix. If it can't be fixed, I'll throw it away."

Jesus, the Risen Lord, confronts this kind of radical individualism of our culture and the 'cult of self-worship.' He says, "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. Do not suppose that I died for you so that you could live peacefully with poverty, child-abuse, homelessness, racism and men and women who don't know me and don't know right from wrong. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. 'Whoever finds his life

will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

I believe that true identity is found only in Christ. A person must lose oneself in the service of Christ and Christ's kingdom to find oneself. We're more than individuals seeking self fulfillment. For the Christian, self fulfillment is discovered through participation with others in the effort to create a just and loving society according to God's will. A Christian doesn't aspire to comfort, success or beauty, or peace and prosperity but to the will of God, the Kingdom of God. "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

In the words of our new Statement of Faith,
In a broken and fearful world
the Spirit gives us courage
to pray without ceasing,
to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior,
to unmask idolatries in church and culture,
to hear the voices of peoples long silenced,
and to live holy and joyful lives,
even as we watch for God's new heaven and new earth,
praying, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

EbzZxX

Let us pray: Holy God: your Son demands complete devotion. Give us courage to take up our cross, and, without turning back, to follow where he leads us, Christ our Lord and Master. Amen.