

Family 101

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Genesis 4:1-16; Colossians 3:12-25; Mark 3:7-35

“Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.” -- Colossians 3:14

Harry Emerson Fosdick, the great preacher of New York’s Riverside Church, used to say that his preaching was mainly personal counseling on a group scale. What he meant by that was that his Sunday sermons were attempts to address the personal problems that people brought to him during the week. After a few years in pastoral ministry, Fosdick observed patterns in the concerns that people brought to their counseling sessions with him, and Fosdick realized that more often than not what he was encountering with his parishioners in his study was the tip of an iceberg that floated in the vast congregations that filled Riverside on Sundays.

This morning, I find myself in Fosdick’s situation. A few weeks ago, one of you asked me to preach on family relationships, and in my conversations with you and other folks over the years – some who come to church, some who don’t – I’ve come to realize that probably no reality causes more pain and confusion in more people’s lives than their relationships with their families.

They may be their relationships with their family of origin – the family into which we’re all born – or they may be their relationships with their family of creation – the family that most of put together when we choose life partners and produce children. Sometimes the relationships people have with both families are difficult, and those are the folks who seem to me to have the toughest time in life.

For better and for worse, our families give us our identities as no other human institution does. The experiences we have as children leave a deeper mark on our personalities than any other encounters we have in life, and we know this because we can watch people exhibit the same patterns of behavior with their spouses and their children that they exhibited with their parents and siblings.

Take birth order, for example. Although social scientists repeatedly warn that there isn’t much experimental evidence to support the notion, many of us still find anecdotal evidence to suggest that the oldest child tends to be the bossy one, the youngest child tends to be the spoiled one, and the middle child tends to be the quiet one. Now since I’m both the youngest and the oldest child in two sets of siblings, I should be both spoiled and bossy. Did I just hear an “Amen”?

Shaky science aside, there’s no doubt that our earliest environments give shape to the personality traits that we will manifest for the rest of our lives, and the family, of one sort or another, constitutes a child’s earliest environment.

So when I talk with couples who plan to get married, I always point out to them that while their marriage may turn out to be temporary, parenthood is forever. Although we don’t, in the church anyway, enter into the covenant of marriage with an eye on the exit sign, we nonetheless recognize that some marriages end, some marriages should end, and some marriages should never have begun. Last Wednesday, during our adult

VBS discussion, we talked about the time many of us can remember when divorce wasn't just frowned upon; it was a cause for scandal in many families, and in some families it wasn't even an option. "Till death do us part," a pledge of serious commitment made in good faith, had morphed, especially for women, into the terms of a domestic prison sentence, something I don't believe Jesus ever intended and something the church should never have endorsed.

Lifelong monogamous heterosexual marriage is part of the script according to which family life is to be lived, and when we don't play our roles according to that script, disapproval is expressed, sanctions are imposed, and few of us can escape the feeling that we have, in some important life endeavor, failed.

But who wrote that script? A lot of people say God did and deposited it for safe keeping in the Bible. But if you look at what the Bible actually says about the family, you'll see much less of a script and much more of a mirror. When we read the Bible comprehensively and honestly, we'll see that the Bible tells us far less frequently how families *should* operate and far more frequently how they *do*.

So let's start with the Bible's first family, the Adams: Adam Adam, Eve Adam, and Cain and Abel Adam. They're not a real family, of course, except in the sense that the Jones family is a real family. You remember the Joneses? They're the ones that so many of us since the Second World War have tried to keep up with. They're not a family, they're *every* family, the representative family, the archetypal family, the mythic family. And since the Hebrew word *adam* means earthling, that's what the Adam family is, too – the archetypal, representative, mythic family of which all of us earthlings are a member.

And if someone asked me to hold up a model for family life, I certainly wouldn't hold up the Bible's first family. Within a generation, the Adam family is literally at each other's throats, and Jim read for us the story of Abel's murder by his brother, Cain. Bible scholars will tell you that this story is an etiology, that is, a story explaining where something came from, and in this case, scholars say, it's the story of the ostensible hostility between settled agriculturalists and nomadic herders.

Well, okay. Cain and Abel certainly can represent farmers and shepherds, just as they can represent all the siblings who've ever resented each other, competed with each other, been disappointed with each other, betrayed each other, and even slain each other. Homicide statistics tell us that about a third of all murder victims are killed by family members, and about seventy per cent of children under age five who are murdered are killed by a family member.

So we need to be honest, as the Bible urges is to be, about what families are and what they are not. Families are no guarantee of safety and well being. Families are no guarantee of happiness. Families are no guarantee of moral nurturing. They may be all of those things, and many, thank God, are; but families may also be places of chaos, pain, and destruction. Being related to someone biologically does not automatically determine how they'll treat you or how you'll treat them.

Chemistry forms the basis of all of our relationships, family included. We are closer to some family members than we are to others, sometimes through shared experiences, but more often because of the underlying simpatico that draws us together to create those experiences in the first place. Some of our relatives we just plain don't like and they don't like us, and we know that family gatherings that force us into each other's company can be a nerve-racking ordeal or an exercise in hypocrisy or both. And who wants to live like that?

And so we try to play according to script. We try to play nice, at least long enough to get the dishes washed, and we go home both relieved and frustrated that we did our duty again. Psychologists, clergy, police, and emergency room personnel can all attest to

the fact that holidays are some of the most stressful times in people's lives, and the single greatest source of that stress is trying to live up to all the "shoulds" of the family script: Everyone should have a family. Families should be together at the holidays. Families should enjoy one another's company. Families should share equally in the planning, work, and expense. And so on.

And sometimes they do. Sometimes families do function as that list of shoulds in Colossians suggests. Sometimes – most times, we hope – husbands do love their wives and do not treat them harshly. Once upon a time, wives did subject themselves to their loving husbands, and sometimes those wives were happy and fulfilled in doing so; sometimes they were abused and miserable. Once upon a time, slaves did obey their earthly masters in everything, as this biblical description of the happy family tells them to, and more recently we've seen slavery as the great evil that it is, which has no place in any family, happy or otherwise.

So when we turn to the Bible for guidance on what family relationships are or are not supposed to look like, we have to do so with prayerful discernment, judgment, balance, and care. The script of the stable, God-ordained household that Paul or someone writing in Paul's name to the Colossians presents in this passage has been modified and needed to be modified, not just regarding the abolition of slavery, but also with regard to telling wives to subject themselves to the rule of the paterfamilias. Telling a corporate lawyer or an airplane pilot or a pediatric surgeon or any other wife that she should submit to her husband today will be met much more often with scorn than with polite attention. Women today are men's partners – not always equal, to be sure, that day has yet to arrive – but they're certainly not the dependents they once were; and as Martha would say, that's a good thing.

There is no script, biblical or otherwise, for family relationships, save one. We find it in that list in Colossians, and played out dramatically in the story of Jesus's description of his true family in Mark. The only family script that really works, for all of us, everywhere and always, is this one, from verse fourteen of the third chapter of Colossians: "Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony."

The love that Paul is referring to is not the erotic love that initially gets us interested in our prospective life partners, and it's not what the Greeks called *philia*, which is personality-driven love. That kind of love is what constitutes friendship, when there's a bond between personalities that may be deep and intimate and completely devoid of erotic attraction.

The love that holds all things together in perfect harmony is based neither on hormones nor personalities, but on the will of God, which is why Jesus said that his family were not those to whom he was related biologically, but rather were those to whom he was related spiritually: "Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

That sounds like a radical redefinition of the family of the sort that would alarm the family-values crowd, but it doesn't seem to me to be much more than naming explicitly the bond that constituted implicitly the chosen people, Jesus's people.

The people of Israel had created and believed in their own version of the myth of the happy family. Israelites said to each other, "I'm okay, you're okay, we're all okay because we're children of Abraham, and God chose Abraham to make us, and through us, the entire world, one big happy family." That's a simplistic reading of God's call to Abraham, but it's easy to see why people held it. Here's what God said, to refresh your memory: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." That's Genesis 12:3. From Abraham's family to our family, one big happy family.

Is that not one of the self-deceiving myths John the Baptist had to explode for those good people who came to him at the Jordan River? “You brood of vipers,” he called them – remember, these are the respectable people like us he’s talking to -- “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for God is able, I tell you, from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.”

The family myth was that descent from Abraham and Sarah automatically bestowed membership in the chosen people, but John says that isn’t so. What makes a child of Abraham and Sarah is a lifestyle, not a set of genes. The DNA that holds the family of Abraham and Sarah together is spiritual, not physical. “Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” That’s family.

They say you can’t choose your family, and there is some truth in that, of course, but there’s more truth in saying that for followers of Jesus Christ, we *must* choose our family. We choose and create our family by choosing to live out God’s will in our own lives, and to ally ourselves with others doing the same. We have to make choices in this life about who we’ll spend our time with. We have to choose whose way of life we’ll emulate and incorporate into our own. We have to choose whose voices we’ll listen to while they’re live, and whose voices we’ll hear in our heads long after those living voices are dead.

Those are choices we can and must make, and we do so not on the basis of the accidental arrangement of DNA, but rather on the very deliberate and decidedly not accidental basis of will – bringing our will into conformity with God’s will.

We do ourselves no favors by pretending that our families always help us do that. In many cases they do, but in many cases they do not. The decisions we make to be or not to be followers of Jesus Christ we make on our own, irrespective of the decisions our families may or may not have made for us once upon a time or are making with us right now. Jesus does not call our families; Jesus calls us: Barb, Jim, Mary, Kimberly, Lois, Kathy, Ed, Gene. Family relationships are vitally important, to be sure, and they can certainly be a great blessing to us, but we must never turn our families into idols.

I want to close now with a true story that taught me something important about the family.

About thirty years ago, in my first year in graduate school, on a September afternoon in Cambridge, the departmental seminar that all of us in Old Testament were required to take was holding its first meeting. The professor in charge that year was trying to put us very nervous first-year students at ease, and so, after we’d all introduced ourselves, faculty members as well as students, the professor concluded his opening remarks by saying, “I hope we’ll all treat each other like family in this seminar.”

Before he was able to go much farther, one of his older and wiser colleagues, Professor Frank Moore Cross, asked for the floor, and he said, “I agree with everything my colleague has just said except for one thing. In this seminar, I hope we’ll treat each other better than many of us treat our families.”

In that instant, I knew I’d heard something important and true and rarely said about family relationships. I hope you have, too.