

LIFE IN FAMILIES

Post Christian and Presbyterian Churches

August 15, 2010

Luke 12: 49-56 and Matthew 10: 34-39

This past Tuesday, I visited an 85-year old woman who is living very peacefully in the last stages of Alzheimer's. Jennie is now unresponsive and is no longer eating or drinking and the hospice nurse had just told the family that most likely their mother had only a few more days to live. As I sat at her bedside, her daughter stroked the back of her mother's head and talked about how this disease had so drastically affected her body and mind in the last few years. The daughter said she was grateful for the healing she and her brother and sister have been able to experience in the last few months of their mother's life. I stood quietly by as this very hurt daughter went on to tell me the painful details of how their father had died when they were all little children and after that, their mother had always put them behind the man in her life at the time. She said, "There were a few good men that Mother either married or dated but for the most part we were left to raise each other. Many things have happened through the years between us and our mother but the final straw for all of us occurred about five years ago when we had to get Mother and her last husband out of jail for writing hot checks and running into cars in their neighborhood and leaving the accident site." At one point in the conversation, the daughter looked at me and said, "Oh, yes, my mother truly put the 'fun' in dysfunctional!"

In our Gospel lesson for today Jesus has some profound things to say about family relationships and what he says makes us cringe and wonder if we are hearing it all correctly. Is this really Jesus? Is this the prince of peace who taught us to love our enemies, the gentle shepherd who taught us to turn the other cheek? It is the kind of pronouncement that makes you wish someone had forgotten to write it down, or that someone else had decided to edit it out. What are we to make of these words about the family? Was Jesus just having a bad day? We pray for Jesus to divide us from our enemies and to protect us from those who seek to corrupt and destroy us, but from our families, from the very people who are supposed to teach us what little we know about the love and forgiveness of God? (Words from Barbara Brown Taylor's sermon referenced below.)

In a sermon entitled, **Family Values**, (from the book, **Gospel Medicine**) the articulate priest, Barbara Brown Taylor writes, "We all know that some people never learned about love and forgiveness at home, and they may be in the best position to understand what Jesus is talking about here. They know that blood relation is no guarantee of love or forgiveness, and that sometime the only way to save your life is to lose your family, closing the door on them and never looking back." Sometimes you have to leave family in order to discover and make family bonds on your own. My own dear Grandmother told me a few months before she died when she came to my ordination at Second Baptist Church in 1989 that she was grateful I had been able to leave home in order to find a sense of home with people she could see truly loved and cared about me.

“In this passage, Jesus is not talking about the ordinary cruelties of family life, as devastating as they can be. He is talking very specifically about the divisions that occur between parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, when he walks into their lives. Jesus is talking about what happens to family loyalty when he asks them to put God first in their lives. He is talking about what happens to family harmony when he asks them to choose whom they will follow.” (Barbara Brown Taylor)

Barbara Brown Taylor paints a cryptic picture of a family sitting around the dining room table one night, minding their own business, when the gospel falls like a sword across their dining room table and quivers there, with half of the pot roast on one side of the table and half on the other, green beans everywhere. Some of those sitting around the table are struck to the heart. They want to pull the sword out and run straight into the street with it, swinging it above their heads and making perfect strangers listen to what just happened to them.”

She says, “Others want to clean up the mess and get on with supper. Sure, it is the gospel, but there is no reason to get all upset about it. Being a good Christian is not all that different from being a good citizen, after all. You just stay out of trouble and act nicely to your neighbors and say your prayers at night. There is absolutely no reason to make such a spectacle out of yourself.”

And then, she says, “there is always the family member who does not see a thing, who does not believe in swords and who goes right on eating as if nothing ever happened, muttering under his breath about how everyone in this house is stark raving mad.”

We all know stories like that and some of us have experienced family life as Jesus is telling us about in this passage. Our enemies are not usually the bloodthirsty motorcycle villains of our imaginations, but people who live much closer to home. They include the parents who raise their children to be doctors and lawyers and have almost succeeded when the last one announces he wants to be a minister, and their faces fall but he goes to seminary anyway, and when they draw up their wills he is not in them. Or the adult children who find out how much money their elderly parents are giving away to a church-run orphanage and have mom and dad declared mentally incompetent in order to protect their inheritance. Or the mother who will not speak to her two adult children because one left the church of his youth for a place where he speaks in tongues and the other has refused to go to church at all. We have all heard stories such as this about family turmoil and for some of us, they are our stories. (Pages 15-16; **Gospel Medicine**)

What is so disturbing about these stories is that Jesus does not say they should not be so. He says, in fact, that they are inevitable, that the gospel is inherently divisive and that we should not be surprised when families fight about it. In a sermon preached by the Presbyterian minister, John Buchanan, he acknowledges that it's not

easy to find nice things about families in the Bible. He affirms the fact that the Bible is very realistic and poignant about family matters. Buchanan says, “The first family is a disaster, or dysfunctional as we have learned to say. Adam and Eve are so co-dependent and addicted to approval that they end up contributing to each other’s moral downfall. Outside paradise they have two sons, one of whom murders the other. And then there is Noah who is discovered naked, in a drunken stupor by his sons, one of whom he curses. Abraham loans his wife, Sarah, to Pharaoh for a while to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his blind father, defrauds his brother, and his sons leave their brother, Joseph, Jacob’s favorite, to die in the desert. David commits adultery and arranges for the murder of Uriah to cover his tracks. His own children are guilty of incest and betrayal, and his friend and commander-in-chief, assassinates David’s beloved son, Absalom, who is leading an insurrection against his father. It is clear that we do not have to look very far to see that the Bible does not romanticize or idealize the family.”

In a book about New Testament history, Professor John Dominick Crossan explains that there is no word in the ancient languages of Hebrew or Greek for the family we know in today’s world that consists of two parents and their children. Rather, the word family meant “household” and included three generations of blood relatives, grandparents, parents, children, as well as a number of other people, servants, slaves, and household workers. The Romans, in whose culture the Christian church began, defined family as everybody who lived under the authority of the father of the household. Crossan

tells us that in Rome, a man's wife was not under his authority but officially remained part of her father's household. That meant responsibility for the children and authority over them resided with the father, although the mother supervised their daily care. Crossan says that it was the father who decided at birth whether a newborn infant would be kept or simply discarded, "exposed" was the name for it.

Professor Crossan says that in its absolute male dominance and social rigidity, the ancient family was a picture of the larger society. It was hierarchical and absolutely fixed. The structure of the family controlled whom a man or woman was and would be, and could be, for as long as they lived. In reaction to this, Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He said the kingdom was present in the life of the world. In stark contrast to society and its basic family structure, God's kingdom was characterized by openness, inclusiveness and radical equality. All were welcome in God's family structure and all received equal status. Social outcasts, women, lepers, children, gentiles, pagans, and old people were invited to be a part of the Kingdom.

Crossan said Jesus was not anti-family. Jesus urged his disciples to obey the commandment about honoring parents, he blessed the children, and he provided for the continuing care of his mother. But one day, when he was preaching and arguing with the scribes, his mother and brothers and sisters came for him, to take him home and he said something that sounds almost cruel: "Who are my mother

and my brothers?” And then Jesus replied, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” I believe Jesus was saying God’s kingdom frees men and women from all that restricts and oppresses, even sometimes from their own families. Sometimes families have to be broken apart for life to happen and for the good news to be experienced.

Michael Lindvall, Pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, tells the beautiful and humorous story of how one country church became family to the outcasts in their midst. In the chapter entitled, **Our Organist**, (from his book, **The Good News From North Haven**), Lindvall tells about being a guest supply preacher for a little church in Carthage Lake, a town on the way down and out. He writes, “The Carthage Lake church hasn’t had a minister of its own since 1939. On the first Sunday of every month a handful of people gather at noon for Sunday school and worship with what ever preacher they can convince to come to Carthage Lake. The Clerk of the congregation, Lloyd Larson, tells the supply preachers that there are only eleven members, but they’ll all be there.” Lindvall says, “And Lloyd Larson promises an organist, the same organist Carthage Lake has been promising guest preachers for 60-plus years, Lloyds’ sister-in-law, Agnes Rigstad.”

The Sunday of his guest appearance arrived and Michael Lindvall writes, “There were actually twelve worshippers on this day scattered throughout the sanctuary, sitting in their customary pews. In the midst of the usual eleven elderly members there sat a young

man. Lloyd had explained that there was no bulletin, that the preacher should do what he wanted and just announce the hymns when he thought appropriate.

Worship began and Michael announced the opening hymn, #204, Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart. Agnes smiled at him and played “What a Friend We Have in Jesus.” The eleven elderly members sang by memory. Only the young man used a hymnal. Following the sermon, Michael announced the next hymn, “Love Divine, All Love Excelling.” He looked directly at Agnes who smiled back and played, “I Love To Tell the Story.” After the prayers and offering, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down and whispered, “Agnes, what are we going to sing?” She smiled and began to play, “Just as I am, Without One Plea.”

After worship, Agnes shook his hand but didn’t say a word. Lloyd sheepishly explained: “Forgot to tell you about Agnes. You don’t need to tell us what the hymn is, only when. Agnes only knows those three hymns, so we always sing them.”

“Good grief, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you’ve been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?” Lloyd was concentrating on the frayed sanctuary carpet. “We like those hymns well enough, and we know them by heart. And Agnes is our organist.”

Later, Michael met the young man who was in worship. His name was Neil Larson and he was Lloyd’s grandson. He explained to

Michael, “Agnes is my late grandmother’s little sister and she has never been quite right. She never says more than a few words but she learned to play those hymns in one week over 60 years ago when the regular organist got sick. It was a moment of musical emergency. Anyway, she hasn’t been able to learn one since. Playing the organ this one Sunday a month means the world to Agnes. Some times I think it’s mostly for her that they keep the church open. Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of every month.”

Neil continued to explain things to Michael. “They asked me to play the organ, of course, they had to ask. But they knew I’d say no. I remember how my grandfather, Lloyd, sighed with relief when I said no.”

“You’re an organist?” the visiting preacher asked.

“Eastman School of Music, class of 1984. I’ve had some big church jobs, the last one down in Texas, a big church with a brand new organ, 102 ranks. Four services a Sunday. Then I got sick. I’ve been HIV positive for six years. The personnel committee of the church figured it out, the weight loss, all the sick days, not married. They told me it would be best if I moved on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven’t spoken since I was 19. I’m not sick enough to be in the hospital, just too tired most of the time. I really had nowhere to go and my grandfather said I could move in with him and Agnes. To tell the truth, I feel right at home in a town of 80 year olds.”

Neil paused and went on, “They keep Agnes and they took me in. And since I moved up here, most every night my grandfather or old man, Engstrom, from down the road opens up the church for me. If it’s cold, they lay a fire in the wood stove, and then I play the organ. It’s a sweet little instrument, believe it or not, and they have kept it in good shape. These last few weeks it’s been almost warm in the evenings, so they leave the doors and windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they listen to me play Bach and all of the classical music I love. And they clap for me from their porches, even Agnes claps.”

As this story so beautifully illustrates, Jesus did not despise the family, but he did redefine it. For him, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside of you but whose image you are created in. It was not a matter of who has the same last name or lives at the same address but who serves the same God.

Barbara Brown Taylor concludes her sermon with these insights. “There was no family tree in Jesus’ Holy Bible. As much as his ancestors may have mattered to him, it was more like a family forest he walked around in, with relatives collected from all over the place and all of them gathered in one place because of their allegiance to one father. It was in this family where they learned what was right and what was wrong, what was worth living for and what was not. Whatever they had or had not learned at their own parents’ knees, God’s family gave them another chance to discover the love and forgiveness they needed to live.”

We give thanks on this day for the good news of the Gospel; good news that brings hope from despair, new beginnings from dead-ends, and a new kind of family relationships from the ones that attempt to do us harm and suck life and love from us. After leaving my patient's bedside last Tuesday, I said my good-byes to the daughter, and she hugged me and said, "Thank you for letting me share all of this with you. I know that I am able to care for my mother at this time and have healing with her only because of the relationships I have experienced in my church through the years that have modeled for me the love and care God truly wants for me to embrace in my everyday living. AMEN!

PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God, we gather together on this day with an awareness that the connections we have in our lives that bind us more closely to you, are the ties that make our lives more meaningful and our faith more real. We know from experience how difficult family life can be and that we truly need lots of friends and loved ones to show us the things that truly matter. We know sometimes painfully that blood relation is no guarantee of love or forgiveness, and that sometimes the only way to save our life is to lose our family, closing the door on them and never looking back. We give thanks that Jesus had the courage to redefine the family so that we all might experience the grace, love, forgiveness, and comfort we need to become people of greater character and compassion who seek each day to live lives that matter to us and to others.

On this day we give thanks for those who have been family to us and who have loved, accepted and cared for us in ways that have allowed us to discover more fully who we are and who you are. As parents and grandparents, we pray for the courage, humility, and steadfastness we need to continue to create family environments that nurture souls and encourage each person to live most fully their gifts, their callings, and their passions. As children, we pray for the wisdom to forgive our parents for their imperfections and mistakes and for the courage to follow Jesus in our own ways. We give you thanks for this church and for the Kingdom in our midst that gives us

a broader sense of family and belonging than we sometimes experience at home.

We pray for our friends and family members who are sick, hospitalized, grieving, or facing difficult challenges. May our worship on this day remind us this week of the things that truly nourish our souls. As we know, the life of faith we are called to embrace is not for sissies. It is powerful stuff, powerful enough to challenge the most sacred human ties and powerful enough to remind us that while the peace of God can divide us, it also is the only thing that can truly set us free. May we have the perspective and courage we need to live Christ's mandate of love and to more fully devote ourselves to his peace mission of bringing God's kingdom more fully to our unfinished world and incomplete selves. In the name of the One who showed us how to live and to love, we pray, "Our Father, ..." Amen.