

Mark 3: 31-35

**Biblical Family Values**

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When I came to this country, I had to learn English, and I had to learn it fast. I went for the total immersion method which worked for me but it was a tough first year. To support my method my roommate introduced me to American TV. I would have been quite content without watching TV but actually it helped immensely. We had our favorite shows: The Cosby Show, Golden Girls, Northern Exposure, Ally McBeal, Picket Fences, Mad About You, Seinfeld, Designing Women. You might think this was a lot of TV but remember, this was Maine - 8 months of winter with nothing to do. And one could only spend so much time in the library.

There was one more show that we watched together, and that was Murphy Brown. The show started in 1988 and featured a main female character as a strong, successful, highly paid, intelligent, professional woman, and single-mother-by-choice. Remember the uproar that issue caused in the political landscape? The show Murphy Brown and the idea of chosen single motherhood were undermining the traditional (right) family make up and (Traditional) Family Values.

The use and abuse of the term "family values" began in 1976 when it was introduced into the Republican Platform. But in 1992 it became the GOP's rally cry when Vice President Dan Quayle bemoaned the collapse of the family because of shows like Murphy Brown.

What made the issue even more confusing when the term was hitched to faith, and the Christian faith in particular. What happened in the 1970s and 1980s was that conservative religious folks took the

values of their faith into the political arena, demanding that everyone abide by those particular faith convictions.

Affirming patriarchy, they quickly targeted everything to do with feminism, especially challenging a woman's right to make her own reproductive choices and to chart her own future. Deeply homophobic, they also targeted the gay community and were especially appalled by any suggestion of marriage equality.

These traditional "family values" have been 'sold' to the masses as biblical family values and over the years have been made the norm. They are biblical, right? No, they are not but we will get to that in a moment.

This month, as we prepare ourselves for the birth of our Lord and Savior in this Advent season, we are going to preach on the topic of family.

Christian communities are famously interested in families. We like to support them and nurture them. We like them to come to church. We like to put pictures of them in our directories. We like to remember special family occasions in worship. People often find their way back to church in the context of developing new families. We often speak of ourselves here at the Congregational Church—with pride—as a "family church."

Our culture embraces and idealizes the traditional family (and by that I mean a mommy, daddy, 2 kids). Just watch commercials. More often than not we are presented with happy families who in all things are put first. Families stick together. They care for each other. They have fun together. They are happy when everyone gets what they want. The traditional family is prioritized and idolized. There is danger in that kind of thinking and acting. It does not reflect the reality of what family is, can be, and should be. It certainly does not reflect what the Bible says about family and values.

So, let take a look at Holy Scriptures, HS and NT to see what we can find out about what constitutes a family and what are biblical family values. For just a moment I invite you to think about a traditional and functional family (just one) in the Bible that reflects good solid values we should emulate. I entertain suggestions... Anyone? Having trouble with this exercise?

Let me give you a quick survey:

Adam and Eve were ok, except for the whole introducing sin into the world and one of their sons killing the other son and then trying to cover it up.

Abraham got nervous when travelling in a new land because his wife Sarah was so beautiful. So when asked he would say she was his sister so that powerful men would not kill him to have her. There was also the fighting between Sarah and Hagar that ended with Abraham banishing his son Ishmael and his mother into the desert, basically condemning them to death.

Isaac (once he got out of therapy from being nearly sacrificed to God by his father) married Rebekah and they had two sons who were polar opposites, and Rebekah and the youngest son Jacob hatched a grand scheme to trick Isaac into giving his blessing to the younger son Jacob instead of Esau. Even years later, Jacob was perpetually fearful that his brother would kill him on sight if the opportunity arose.

Jacob's father-in-law Laban (who was also his uncle but we will not go there) tricks him into marrying the wrong daughter; and then Jacob in return tricks Laban out of the best of his flocks; and the two sisters bitterly compete with each other for Jacob's affection and esteem; Jacob then shows such favoritism to one of his sons that the others conspire to kill him but end up selling him into slavery instead.

King David, the man after God's own heart, had a little incident with adultery and murder; but he was Israel's best king.

In the **New Testament** we are introduced to Mary and Joseph with Joseph being dissuaded by an angel from having his young, pregnant fiancé dismissed and publically humiliated – Ok so this one is not their fault, but they would not have been up for functional family of the year in Nazareth.

The disciples leave everything – family and jobs, to follow Jesus.

And I suppose we can end our biblical family values lesson with Paul's advice not to marry at all.

What we actually learn from the Bible is that there is great diversity within the make-up of families. There were male and female-headed families. There were polygamous and single-parent families. There were levirate marriages where a man married the widow of his dead brother to keep the family together. There were same-sex partnerships, not necessarily sexual in nature, like Ruth and her mother-in-law Naomi. But then there was that loving relationship between Jonathan and David, whatever form that took. There were adult siblings sharing a home, being a family – Lazarus, Mary and Martha. There were celibate single people like John the Baptist. Priscilla and Aquilla had a dual-career marriage without children.

This might surprise you but there is no single biblical model of family that would fit the traditional family or whatever is understood as traditional family values. "Honor your father and mother" might be the closest we come to a solid family value.

And then there is Jesus. He seems to throw family and family values 'under the bus.'

*“Who is my mother? Who is my family?” Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my sister, my brother, my mother.”*

We should be used to the fact that Jesus’ life and teachings challenge many of our assumption. But this one, challenging one’s loyalty to one’s family might be the most difficult to reconcile. There are a number of these zingers against family that might make us squirm:

- Hate father and mother to become a disciple
- Leave the dead to bury their dead in order to follow him
- Leave your family – wife and children to become a true disciple

To be honest, for a long time I found these words troubling, but in time have come to see them as radically inclusive and liberating.

They are troubling because they seem to go directly against the law, the Torah. “Honor your father and mother” is a good solid commandment just like the one about the Sabbath. But then, Jesus broke that one too, when the Sabbath got in the way of healing a person in need. Maybe this is a similar situation. Jesus’ mission is to bring about the kingdom of God which is not small task. He has a clear sense of his calling and maybe he realized that he cannot be both: the obedient son and the Messiah. You can’t go out by day to change the world and in the evening return home to mom’s cooking. It is clear that he placed faithfulness to God above any other commitment, and he expects that from those who want to follow in his footsteps.

So, and in that sense, his troublesome words become liberating and radically inclusive. Jesus is basically affirming that what matters in God’s kingdom is a person’s faith, a person’s commitment to follow God’s will, a person’s openness to God’s mercy.

In other words, faith matters much more than birthright, than family ties, than ethnicity, than inherited pedigree. This is the type of openness which the apostle Paul reflects in his famous words

from Gal. 3:28: "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 totally redefining family in terms of faith. Membership in God's family is open to all, equally, without discrimination—based only on a willingness to do God's will. This undercuts any practices in the community of faith that discriminate on the basis of gender, race, social class, age, or any other of our human lines of insider-outsider distinction.

And the underlying value in God's family is love. Biblical scholar Walter Wink said: "The Bible knows only a love ethic, which is constantly brought to bear on whatever mores are dominant in any given country, culture or period."

Ethicist Joseph Fletcher said: "There is only one thing that is always good and right, intrinsically good regardless of the context, and that is love." That's the ultimate family value.

Families are about love, no matter how diverse they are. Think of the families that you know. Two gay men living together, two lesbians loving one another – that's family. A man and a woman, with or without children, that's family. A single mom or dad who works really hard to care for his or her children, that's family. Complicated blended homes, two dads, two or three moms, lots of grandparents, that's family – IF love is central to those relationships.

Families are about love – nothing more, nothing less. "Family values" are those values that help us appreciate the gifts of all, values that affirm diversity, values that proclaim God loves each of us as we are, values that say that life takes on real meaning when we stop wasting energy judging and condemning one another, and when we just try to live together in love. Amen