

Luke 1:5-25

The Elusive Perfect Family

Sunday December 8, 2013

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This month our sermon theme is Family. As we come to worship today in the middle of the winter holiday season, families are close to mind. We have lists of gifts we want to buy for our closest kin. We have cards we hope to send to a wider circle of family and friends who seem like family. Communities like ours put a lot of emphasis on family life. Many people move here to start a family or nurture one. So as a community we concentrate on the quality of the schools and recreational programs. In churches like ours we make children and youth a high priority. Together in worship we talk about creating homes where everyone can reach their potential. In the weeks leading up to Christmas we plan fulfilling family activities, and plan to attend the Christmas pageant on Christmas Eve. We plan to go Christmas caroling and offer holiday cheer to the less fortunate. We make plans to gather with loved ones to give and receive gifts.

Garrison Keillor writes about the impact that this season has on families, “One way or another we are all touched, sometimes waylaid, or even transformed by this singular time of year. Christmas is a compulsory course, not an elective, and we all go through it together.” But as strong as the impulse is to create a wonderful family experience in these weeks leading up to Christmas, there is also the temptation to get caught up in the desire to make things just right, to anticipate the needs of all the family members. It is a slippery slope when pretty soon we strive to meet unrealistic expectations for Christmas. We get caught up in lofty goals – of finding the fullest tree, or the right presents. It takes Charlie Brown to remind us each year that it was never the details or the standards of this holiday that made it wonderful for families, but the love.

The story of the birth of Jesus in Luke's gospel begins with a story of love, but it is not the story you might think. It is the tale of an old couple, long past their prime who had weathered disappointments together, but who loved each other over many years. Zechariah was a scholar of scripture, a respected leader, and a faithful husband. His wife Elizabeth was devoted and kind. They adored each other and they loved God, but their life was far from perfect because they shared the sadness that they never had children. Older now, their dream of a large family had slipped firmly from their grasp.

Zechariah was a priest in the temple. The story begins on the day when he was chosen to light the incense in the holiest inner sanctum of the altar. In Judaism the altar was not open to everyone. The outer court was for non-Jews. The middle court was for women and children. The inner court was for devout men and their sons who had come of age. The altar itself was reserved for the priestly order, and groups of priests took turns serving there. From that group one priest was chosen to clean the lamps, and refresh the incense in the hidden sacred chamber where they kept the Ark of the Covenant. That day when Zechariah was chosen to walk into this holiest spot on earth was the pinnacle of his career, and high point of his life. This day Zechariah saw a vision of the angel Gabriel. Gabriel told him that he would have a son. Though it was the news he had longed to hear, Zechariah was incredulous and he argued with Gabriel. The angel took away his ability to speak, so that he would learn to listen. What can we learn from this story for our lives?

Even the most established families don't have perfect lives. Elizabeth and Zechariah may have looked like they had everything you might want in their time and place. Culture, education, respect were theirs. Yet they had a gaping hole in their life's plan, a huge disappointment that they could not get past.

You might look around this church and tell yourself that you are the only one who has real troubles. Indeed everyone else looks pretty pulled together here this morning. But you would be wrong.

In fact I suggest you take a moment and look around and remind yourself of this. “I don’t know what troubles you have, but I will assume that you are dealing with as much as I am, or even more trouble than I realize or need to know about. I will assume that you have problems too, and I am not the only one whose life is not perfect here today.

This week Norman Rockwell’s painting entitled “Giving Thanks” was sold for \$46 mill. It appeared on the cover of Life Magazine in 1951. It depicts a dinner with a table where four people are seated. One is an elderly woman in a white blouse and hat. By her side is small boy in a white shirt. These two have bowed their heads to say grace, presumably before they eat a meal. Across the table are two young men, one with a cigarette in his mouth. These two are watching the more penitent folks as they pray. Around the busy diner are lots of other people caught mid-stream, as Rockwell does so beautifully.

Rockwell’s work is still selling at auction for millions of dollars. Why are his paintings so cherished? Part of the appeal is that he has such a winsome eye when it comes to human nature. He sees humans as imperfect, but delights in the details of our foibles. He paints with a sense of humor, and points to the irony in our lives. I imagine Rockwell’s view was a great relief in the 1950’s because so many people were striving to have perfect families, and perfect meals, and perfect occasions. He served as a prophet with a canvas, who offered a counter-cultural perspective that celebrated the quirky underside of the perfectionist picture everyone was striving for.

The plain truth is that life is full of mistakes. Last week when the Prayer Shawl knitters met, one of the most experienced knitters found a mistake in her work. This woman learned to knit in Scandinavia and we all admire her, because she does beautiful work and her fingers just fly. I was complementing her on her basket weave pattern when she looked down and found a mistake. She laughed and said, “Well, I see a mistake here, but I don’t think anyone else will notice it.” We give these

prayer shawls to people because they get cold or sick from taking chemo treatments. We give them to people who feel lonely or overwhelmed. We sent one to a high school student who was hospitalized for a series of leg surgeries after the marathon bombings, and her prayer shawl appeared in all her hospital pictures because she had it with her all the time. In every case the shawls bring comfort, a sense of the church's compassion, and warmth, literally and figuratively. Getting every stitch exactly right is not the point. One woman who is **not** a great knitter but who has a faith that could move mountains, made a shawl for a friend who was in hospice. She learned to knit so she could give one of these shawls, but her shawl had several large holes where she had dropped a couple of stitches. She gave it to her friend just before she started hospice care. Even with several glaring mistakes in it, that shawl changed someone's last days on this earth.

Once you learn to accept that chasing perfection is folly, the question is what do you do with your life? On Thursday of this week we paused to thank God for the life of one giant of a man- Nelson Mandela. The mark of his greatness has been that he never forgot his humanity, his roots, and he remained humble even when he became one of the greatest world leaders of our time. Mandela realized that the important thing is not to deny your humanity but to dignify it with your integrity. Born in one of the poorest and most flagrant examples of apartheid's cruel injustice, Soweto Township, he grew up a barefoot shepherd. Yet later in life, he often said, "I am not a saint unless a saint is a sinner who keeps on trying." He never denigrated his past; nor did he pursue perfection but used his considerable energy to change his corner of the world.

In 1994 just three years after he was released from prison Mandela spoke at a Zionist Christian Church's Easter Conference. Mandela wrote about Jesus:

"The Good News came to us in a Messiah, a man who chose not one race or country, not one language or tribe, but all of humankind... a Messiah, who came in the form of a mortal man, but who by suffering attained immortality. Born an outcast in a stable, and executed like a criminal, Jesus' life bears testimony to the truth that there is no shame in poverty: Those who should be ashamed are they who impoverish

others.

There is no shame in being persecuted: Those who should be ashamed are they who persecute others.

There is no shame in being conquered: Those who should be ashamed are they who conquer others.

There is no shame in being oppressed: Those who should be ashamed are they who oppress others.”

With his own imperfect life, and muddy family ties, Jesus of Nazareth reminds us that the holiest moments in life often spring from the humblest origins. His story tells us that God is prepared to send angels – freedom fighters and prophets, messengers of hope who bring blessings we cannot imagine on our own. Just as God was watching the priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth, God is watching each of us and searching for ways to lighten our load, to bring fresh hope and to unite us in new chapters of harmony and hope. That’s the Christmas message.