

JESUS' FAMILY VALUES

Matthew 10.34-39

June 25, 2017, Pride Sunday

Tim Phillips, Seattle First Baptist Church

The text for this morning should come with a warning label for anyone who believes that the biological family – dad, mom, and the kids – is the end all and be all of biblical family values. Jesus says:

Matthew 10.34-39

³⁴“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. ³⁵For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; ³⁶and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. ³⁷Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; ³⁸and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

On this Sunday when we are talking about “Jesus’ family values,” it presents a good opportunity to say a few words about worship this summer with our families and children.

Our Godly Play classroom is taking a break this summer and we are inviting families and children to be in worship with us. We still do have a professionally-staffed nursery downstairs but we are inviting families to worship together with us here in the sanctuary or in the Brawley Room – what we are calling the “wobble room” these days – where there are activities for children and where families can be part of worship in a setting where children may be more comfortable.

The Brawley Room is not sound-proof and I suspect – I hope – there will be the sounds of children in our time of worship together.

If you find yourself being distracted by this over the summer, I have two things to say to you.

First, we should be grateful that there are the sounds of children in our worship together.

Second, for those of you who tell me from time to time that you are concerned about our future because there are no young families and children here, this is an opportunity to say to you that apparently you have not been paying attention.

And if I wanted to get biblical with you, I would remind you of the story that comes later in Matthew, Matthew 18, where, in answer to the question, “who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven,” Jesus calls a little child and puts that child right in the middle of the crowd and says, “truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven ... whoever welcomes a child in my name, welcomes me.”

And just to be clear, the disciples of Jesus’ day apparently were also not paying attention because just one chapter later (Matthew 19), people are bringing little children to Jesus and the disciples speak “sternly” to the families and try to send them away. But Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me and do not stop them for it is these to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs.”

In other words, this summer in our worship together, we have the opportunity to practice Jesus’ family values.

Some of us are off this week to the national gathering of American Baptists in Portland.

I am grateful to our choir and to Vicky and to our delegates – there are probably about 50 of us headed to Portland. I am grateful and proud that our progressive voice in our denomination will be loud and clear.

The truth is, there are things I love and things I dread about the gathering of our national American Baptist family.

I love it that that there are so many different voices in our life together. We are one of the most diverse denominations in the country. I am proud to say that at the last national gathering I attended in Kansas City, the opening night speaker was Michelle Alexander, the author of *The New Jim Crow* about the devastating effect of the mass incarceration of African-American men in this country. It was powerful and she spoke to that motley crew of American Baptists to the sound of applause and shouts of “amen!”

Sometimes, in that diversity, there are other voices. I remember the year in the exhibit hall that some group had put together a booth proclaiming something like, “American Baptists for Biblical Values.” And what struck me was this giant picture of a white family – dad, mom, and two kids – standing behind a brand new fancy red car.

Really? I thought. If this is “biblical family values,” what Bible are you reading?

It didn't seem like they were paying attention to the values expressed in the story of Jesus here in Matthew; a story that begins with, and I mean this with absolute respect, a list of “uppity women” in the genealogy of Joseph: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. All of them interesting stories about “family values.”

They must have missed the part in Matthew 8 where someone wants to follow Jesus but wants to bury his father first and Jesus callously says: “Let the dead bury the dead.”

Or the story where the biological family of Jesus, his mother and brothers, show up at a preaching gig in Matthew 12. And when they inform him that his family is there, he looks around the room at his disciples and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers;

for whoever does the will of my Abba in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

I like to remind folks who say that marriage is between one man and one woman that Jesus tells the religious leaders in Matthew 22 that, in the resurrection – in the fullest expression of God’s kingdom - “we will be like the angels, neither married nor given in marriage.”

Perhaps today it would be good to be reminded that, given our national conversation about healthcare, that the Jesus of Matthew spends most of his time healing poor people – providing free healthcare to people’s children and Peter’s mother-in-law and even to the “beloved one” (read: male lover) of a Roman military officer.

That’s the family values of Jesus in Matthew.

And that is important because, as Rebecca Ann Parker points out: *Theology and family values are inextricably linked: If God is a strict father who demands punishment for human sin, earthly fathers should follow suit. As liberals, we have not only critiqued but also reframed theology into a different image of family, a different practice of love, a different social agenda.*”

So when we read that Jesus says, “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s enemies will be the members of one’s own household,” we don’t have to look very far to see one version of those kind of family values. All we have to do is to listen to the heart-wrenching stories of parents, in the name of Jesus, cutting off their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender children or children abandoning their gay parents or faith communities throwing out their own members because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

The intersection of what we mean by “family” and what we mean by “God” can have tragic consequences.

So we have to decide today if this is what we mean when we are talking about the family values of Jesus.

There are historians who tell us that this text is a painful expression of the struggle going on between Jews and Gentiles in that early community of Jesus. It was a struggle of belonging: Did the community of Jesus belong to the broad umbrella of Judaism? And how much of the Jewish tradition belonged to this new community that included Gentiles? Families were being torn apart by these questions.

Essentially, they tell us, this is a text about the conflict of biology and tradition over against belonging; about how a sense of belonging is the core of what it means to be a family and how belonging can transcend family and biology and national interest and identity.

Jesus' family values hinged on the question of how we belong to each other.

It's that sense Cherry learned in her Baptist Youth Fellowship and longs for in community today.

It's the way we treat children whether they are ours or not because we belong to each other.

It's the way we treat people who are poor whether we know them or not because we belong to each other.

It's the way we treat sick people regardless of who they are because we belong to each other.

There's a reason why Diana Butler Bass says it's time for us to reverse that old standard order of things that starts with believing something and then behaving in a certain way and then, maybe, if we get it all right, we find a way to belong to each other.

It's time to be clear about a set of values that begins with belonging and then tries to work out, no matter how imperfectly, how we do that. And then, in the process, maybe we discover what it is we really believe.

The problem I have with anti-gay family values is that it starts with what someone believes. It starts with *not* belonging. It's the cart before the horse and, in my experience, that doesn't turn out well.

If we start with how we all belong to each other and work on how we do that together, then, maybe, we can figure out what it is we believe.

There's a reason why one of our eleven Heritage Hymns comes out of a story about our beloved Rod Romney trying to care for a young man who was rejected by his family because he was gay. It was out of that story that "bring us home on love's renewing tide to the place of our belonging" came to be.

And we sing it over and over again to remind us that one of our primary values is that we all belong to each other.

We sing it again this Pride Sunday. And, today, perhaps if you listen like you have never listened before, you will hear that voice in a way that can break open your heart and show us the way for us to belong to each other.

May it be so.

NOTES

Rebecca Ann Parker, *Blessing the World: What can save us now?* (Skinner House Books, 2006), p.114. The idea that Matthew comes out of this struggle between Jews and Gentiles in the early church is described by Michael H. Crosby, *Spirituality of the Beatitudes* (Orbis Books, 1989), pp.200-201 and in Barbara Brown Taylor's *Seeds of Heaven: Sermons on the Gospel of Matthew* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004); see her treatment of the struggle and a common sense of belonging in "Exceeding Righteousness," pp.1-7.