

Christmas Day Sermon 2018

Luke 2:1-20

The Gift of Family

As we have traveled through the Advent Season, we have pondered the gifts that Advent gives us. The gift of Patience as we wait for the coming of the new-born king, expectant but living in the moment we are in. The gift of Silence and Speech. Of the power of pondering, and then speaking. Last Wednesday we heard about the gift of Hope- the light that leads us ever into the future.

The final gift of Advent is the first gift of Christmas. Family.

If you think about it, the entire first two chapters of Luke's Gospel has been about family. Zechariah and Elizabeth, faithful servants of God who have not been able to have a family. Finally, they get their deepest desire, a son! Mary and Elizabeth, two women at different moments in their life, but sharing the same joy and trepidation- A child, at their ages! Mary and Joseph, just starting out together surprised by a son, but no ordinary child. Jesus, born surrounded by family; Mary, Joseph, probably some extended kin if we follow the sermon from last night.

Family, even in scripture, can take all kinds of forms. In the Hebrew Scriptures- what has been called the Old Testament- family was the extended form. Often what you spoke of was not family, but household. Everyone who lived in that grouping was- to one degree or another- family. Even the servants. Patriarch- perhaps with several wives, their children and helpers. It would include the sons

and their wives, his grandsons and their wives, plus any unmarried children and grandchildren.

This household family was the main context in which you lived your life. But you also had links to other households through clan and especially Tribe.

By the time Jesus was born, that idea of family had also come to include a more nuclear family under one roof; parents and children, perhaps sons and their wives. But you still had strong family connections. Many people would in one way or another, be related.

Family for the Jews and for early Christians was understood to be a gift from God and was the main unit for inclusion, authority, worship and teaching. It was the context in which everything else existed.

Martin Luther carried on this high view of family. He understood the basic family unit of parents and children to be the core vocation- the core relationship God had given us to live in. It was within the family that we experience in an incarnated, and embodied way the reality of God's love and desire for us.

Parents, in this way, are God for their children. They teach them through their actions about God's unconditional love by their unconditional love. They teach them about care for strangers, about the strength family can give in those difficult moments, the joy multiplied of family in moments of celebration. It is in our family that we first encounter and live with God.

God has given us the gift of family. And God in Jesus has experienced the gift of family. The infant laid in the manger needed loving parents to feed and change

him. And despite what some may try and tell you, yes...I'm pretty sure his poop did stink!

Jesus knew the comfort of a mother's lap, of a father's hug. He knew the joys of learning from his parents the basics of life: how to eat, talk. How to dress himself. To say please and thank you. To learn from his father what it meant to be a man in that world and the things particular to his father- the shaping of wood, the duties of a Jewish man. He learned from and helped his mother- fetching water and wood, tending any animals they had.

In that town of Nazareth, Jesus would have been surrounded by cousins and others to play and have fun. And in those extended relationships of family, he would have learned about playing fair, arguments and how to apologize and forgive.

The gift of family is in many ways the gift of life. There is family by blood and there is family by choice, but there is something in sharing the same blood with someone, some intangible gift and responsibility that goes beyond everything else. Through circumstances not entirely my own, I have seen my niece a handful of times in my life. The same with my cousins from the Barnickel side of the family (who, interestingly enough are pretty close by in the WI and IL area now). But they are my blood and I would do anything I can for them because of that. Often, regardless of how you may feel about them at any given moment, that reality of shared blood, that connection trumps everything else. That is the gift of family- knowing that regardless of what comes- you can count on them.

There is also that gift in family that is chosen. Not everyone has that gift of biological family. Orphans, those who are widowed, or abandoned. Then, can

come the gift of family that is chosen. I have a number of acquaintances who; through necessity and choice, have adopted. Often children from other countries or from other ethnicities. What a gift that can be, to know that these people chose to love you, chose to take on the joys and responsibilities of raising you and loving you even when they didn't have to. To say, "You are mine and I am yours and nothing will change that."

This is why when Jesus talks about family and talks about placing God above all else, people are shocked. Because he is stepping on some of these gifts, on some of these expectations. But it also points out how central God is. Because it can be easy to turn our family, our parents, our children, into an idol. To believe that here, in these relationships, will we be saved.

God in Jesus affirms and experiences the value, the joy, the gift of family. But Jesus also reminds us that the relationship we share with God, as those baptized into the Body of Christ, made children of God, trumps all of those. Because without God in the center of family, at the head of family, it just becomes another idol.

But that is all to come- something to keep in mind. But today, this season, as the hectic Christmas Eve is gone. As shepherds have gone home, and the first day of a new family dawns. There is just father, exhausted mother, sleeping child.

Today, there is our own family, by birth and blood. By choice, gathered together to sing and celebrate. To love and laugh. As we end this year and prepare for the next. Family is never perfect, and it can be difficult to navigate. But when it comes right down to it. Thanks be to God for the gift of family.