

**December 18, 2016 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)**

**TEXT: Mark 3:31–35**

**TITLE: What Family Said About Jesus**

*By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

How would you describe your family? You can be poetic, saying “Families are like a strong tree, whose branches grow in different directions but whose roots remain as one.” You can say, “Families are like a dear octopus from whose tentacles you never quite escape, nor in your inmost hearts, ever quite wish to.” Or you can be more realistic: “Families are like fudge—mostly sweet with a few nuts.” The truth be told: families are complicated. They’re complicated because they are tied up with so many things at once—love, intimacy, children, homes, work, finances, past memories, present challenges, future dreams. Everyone in a family is unprepared for their role and has to learn on the job. And the most that any of us can say on any given day is, well, I tried my best.

Think about your own family—and now think for a moment about Jesus’ family. Not the nativity set version or the stained glass window version, but the real, Jewish, 1<sup>st</sup> century A.D. version. We are not told very much in the bible about Jesus’ family. There’s Mary—a young girl promised in marriage to a respected man. She has an angel visitation and soon is found to be pregnant. Joseph has an angel visit in a dream and is instructed to take her as his wife. They must share this news with their families, which likely led to some consternation and a fair amount of whispering. Luke says that the couple had to travel about 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem for a Roman census, where Mary gave birth to her firstborn child. Shortly thereafter they traveled six miles from Bethlehem into Jerusalem to bring their offerings to the temple in accordance with the laws and customs of their Jewish faith. They were not wealthy, since we’re told they didn’t bring a sheep as a sacrificial gift, but only a couple of turtledoves. And then, Jesus’ family pretty much leaves the gospel narrative except for one time when Jesus was 12, plus the incident we heard about today when Jesus was likely around 30.

It is not surprising that the gospels do not tell us very much about Jesus’ family, because that is not why they were written in the first place. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were written to tell the story of Jesus—primarily the story of his death and resurrection as well as his teachings and radical love. They were not written to talk about his upbringing or his family dynamics. The light shining from Jesus’ story was so bright that it necessarily cast everything else into shadow. But if we shield our eyes just briefly from that bright light, we can see a few things about Jesus’ family that help us with the sweetness and nuttiness of our own families.

First, we know that Jesus’ family was a family of faith. Apart from the angel’s annunciation to Mary, there are no grand miracles associated directly with them. But we know they worked diligently and lived faithfully, keeping the Torah

requirements, bringing sacrifices to the temple, journeying to Jerusalem for the festival days. It's a family dynamic that is worth following by us even today. We are to work diligently and live faithfully. That means faith is an active part of your thinking and, hopefully, your acting each day. That may happen through explicit acts of faith—a prayer spoken out loud or in your heart, reading scripture or a devotional book—or by simply being aware, kind, patient with those around you and with yourself as a child of God. Look, you're attending church today. Someone else in your life likely knows that you are here, that you're a part of this church. In today's secular and distracted society, that alone is a big thing. So let people know where you are. Daily live your faith with humility yet without apology. That is our calling from God.

Second, we know things happened to Jesus' family they had trouble understanding. Mary, the angel and the pregnancy was one big thing, both for her and Joseph and for their families. And once Jesus was born, the visits of the shepherds and the magi were a lot to sort out. Just who exactly was their son? Later in the temple, when Simeon offered a prophecy over Jesus, calling him one destined for the falling and the rising of many, a sign that will be opposed and a sword that would pierce Mary's own soul—all that had to be troubling to hear.

Elsewhere in scripture we are told that Mary and Joseph had other children, at least four more sons plus one or two daughters (Matthew 13:55). Yet, the reality is this: there is no evidence that Jesus' family truly understood who he was until after his resurrection. It appears that Jesus' ministry took place independent of his family, and to some degree, in spite of his family—so much so that when Jesus was teaching in the area near where his family lived, his mother and siblings came to find him to see if he was well. In fact, they wanted to restrain him, worried that the stories others told were true—that he was possessed and had “gone out of his mind” (Mark 3:21). Sometimes those closest to us remain a mystery to us. Sometimes the bright light of who someone is can best be seen from a distance rather than from the perspective of one's close family members.

Now, lest we are tempted to be too hard on Jesus' family, we do know that they came to be strong witnesses to Jesus Christ and even leaders in the early church. His mother was both at the cross of her son and apparently present in the early Easter gatherings of the disciples. And Jesus' brother James became one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church—even martyred for his beliefs in the years just prior to the martyrdom of Peter and Paul.

All of this tells us something important about families—that they will contain both times of love and times of confusion; unique personalities yet a shared history, like the tree branches emerging from a common root. And most importantly only when our definition of family expands beyond biology to Christ-centered theology can we see and understand what families are really all about.

Let's shift to popular culture for a moment. Think back to how television sit-com families have changed over the decades. Long ago there were TV families like Ozzie & Harriett, Donna Reed, and Leave it to Beaver. Then in the 60s & 70s, we were introduced to a single parent household (My Three Sons), a blended family (The Brady Bunch), and Archie Bunker's outspoken blue-collar home (All in the Family). In the 80s we had families split over politics (Family Ties) as well as families that seemed the opposite of everything we expected them to be (The Simpsons). The topic of race emerged on our TV screens with the Cosby Show, the Jeffersons, and mixed households like Diff'rent Strokes. In the 90s, the family stories became rougher and edgier with Married with Children and Roseanne. And now the TV image of family is all over the map: families of singles grouped together (Seinfeld, Friends, Big Bang Theory) or families crossing boundaries of race, class, and sexual identity (The Middle, Modern Family, Black-ish, Fresh off the Boat, Transparent). At their worst, these depictions of family are done to entertain, distract and discomfort us. At their best, these shows lift up what we've always known to be true—families are messy yet fundamentally about love, commitment, forgiveness, and inclusion.

Jesus' family worried about him and tried to intervene for his safety based on their limited understanding of what family life should look like. But when told that his mother and brothers and sisters were outside seeking him, Jesus replied, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my family." The preacher Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way: *"Jesus did not despise the family, but he did redefine it. For him, the 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, which means that his family became huge beyond counting, with lepers and tax collectors and Roman centurions in it, with scruffy looking men who smelled of fish and ladies in robes made of gold brocade and hordes of squealing children."* Or to use the TV analogies, it means family is the Brady Bunch and the Simpsons, Modern Family and Transparent. It means it's East Liberty and Shadyside, Allegheny and Butler counties, America and Mexico and Indonesia and Malawi.

I don't mean all this in a simplistic, saccharine way. When Mark wrote his gospel, followers of Jesus were being kicked out of their families and the synagogues for their beliefs. And we all know that a fundamental human instinct skews toward exclusion instead of inclusion. That was true in ancient Palestine and in too many ways remains true in modern America. Jesus' family wanted to bring him to his senses, but in the end he brought them and all of us to our senses with a few words: "Here is my mother, my brothers and sisters. Whoever—whoever, without qualifier, caveat or conditions, does the will of God is my family."

God takes whatever is best in the world and then adds to it. God says "Yes" to family, "Yes" to love, "Yes" to loyalty, patience and forgiveness – even as God adds to it a holy "and". "Yes, and" to blended families, foster kids, adoption. "Yes,

and” to singles and committed lovers and outsiders-brought-in. “Yes, and” to new beginnings beyond brokenness or abuse or addiction or neglect. Saying “Yes, and” to whomever Jesus’ light shines upon and then reflects that light back in love, word, and deed, well, there is our family. For that, may our response be: Thanks be to God.