

Saving the Savior

sermon digest

Christmas I - December 27, 2009

Mark 3:21-22, 31-35; 6:2-4

larry dipboye

The Feast of the Holy Family on the Roman Catholic calendar falls on the Sunday after Christmas. Following logically the preparation of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, the Holy Family celebrates the family of Jesus— Mary, Joseph and the baby—as a model for the human family and the promotion of family values. As Catholic festivals go, the Holy Family is fairly recent. Organized devotion to the family of Jesus originated in Canada in the 17th century and was added to the calendar by Pope Benedict XV in 1921.

Outside the birth narratives, biblical information on the family of Jesus is scant. Through the ages, the church has tended to fill in biblical blanks with pious mythology that serves purposes far beyond our ability to know. That Christians would make idealized assumptions about the family of Jesus is understandable. Just as devotion to one another in our own families causes us to ignore unpleasant truth, such as a drinking problem, devotion to Jesus causes Christians to create a crust of insulation from the unpleasant realities of a limited existence in a harsh world.

The perfect family is a myth. The closest brush we have with the family of Jesus appears in Mark's Gospel, written well before the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. Early in the ministry of Jesus, his family "went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'" Matthew and Luke tell about the accusation that Jesus is in league with Satan in his exorcism of demons, but they leave off the gossip about a mental break and the attempt at a family rescue. Were Matthew and Luke engaged in selective memory to avoid unpleasant family secrets? Adding insult to injury, Jesus responds to the word that his family is waiting to take him home by saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." When Jesus taught in the synagogue of his hometown of Nazareth, Mark notes the accusing comments of the neighbors. Why, this is the carpenter (Matthew says, "carpenter's son"). He is son of Mary and brother of James, Joses, Judas, and Simon. He made the table we eat on every day. His brothers have worked our fields. His mother, bless her heart, has worked as a servant to keep her pathetic little family together. Now, I am elaborating on the facts! Joseph is neither mentioned nor alluded to, leading to further speculation that Joseph is missing, assumed dead, explaining why Jesus is called Mary's boy; and some think that this is a pejorative comment about the son of a single mother, perhaps even suggesting illegitimacy.

Within the bounds of poverty, possible scandal, and an absent father, the family of Jesus may be the ideal, but the biblical picture is anything but perfection. For generations churches have focused ministry on the ideal family of four—Mom, Dad, brother, and sister. The imperfect family in which divorce, disease, delinquency, or defection has occurred has often been ignored. But the real community in which we live is full of families that do not meet our perfectionist standards. In fact, the church—our church—every church, is packed with hurting people where the pain connects directly to the family. The ideal family, if there is such a thing, does not measure down to our reality especially in our modern world. But, what a shock to discover that the measured perfection of the Holy Family is more like us than we have ever allowed ourselves to accept.

In some families mental illness is something like pregnancy. When it happens, the condition is ignored as long as possible and the cause is an embarrassment that no one wants to discuss. Without question, we have need for mental health professionals, and open discussion of healthy behavior contributes to happiness in life and peace in the family; but the jury remains out on the odd behavior of some folks that is considered abnormal. The community is whispering "crazy Jesus," and the family acts to "restrain" him. They either wish to remove their brother/son from public ridicule or to protect him from himself. In either case, the family has bought into the gossip. Good parents often want their children to fit in, to be "normal," to find a vocation that brings dignity and honor to the family. That does not include casting out demons and starting up a faith-healing ministry. In our quest for normalcy we often overlook the fact that eccentricity is characteristic of genius and that abnormal behavior in abnormal circumstances is normal, according to Victor Frankl.

A few years ago a friend and church member was called to Chattanooga to be near her

hospitalized seventy-something mother. She checked into a hospital guest house and spent the day by her mother's bedside. Exhausted she headed for her room early to rest for the next day's ordeal. On arrival, she received a call from a nurse on her mother's floor asking that she come immediately, something may be wrong. When pressed for details, the nurse said, "Your mother wants to phone her father and talk with him." The daughter asked, "Well, did you let her make the call?" It just did not seem normal to the nurse for a seventy-plus year old woman in poor health to have a living father. The truth, not assumption, is the measure of sanity. The family of Jesus, including Mary, stopped with assumptions of a mental breakdown.

Family values set limits as well as standards. I was shocked beyond measure. We were involved in a conference on Christian ethics attended mostly by ministry professionals. The sermon by Paul Duke blasted our assumptions about traditional family ethics. The buzz word "family values" had become the undefined ideal which every family was expected to achieve. Paul dared to question the ideal as having anything to do with reality and to challenge the glass ceiling of family loyalty that sometimes rests over the calling of God.

Cameron Lee wrote in 1998, "Considering how widely the term *family values* has been used in recent years, it is troublesome that there is little consensus on what the term actually *means*. While preachers and politicians, social critics and social scientists, debate their views in the public square, the attentive server is not always sure that the parties to the debate are actually talking about the same thing." (*Beyond Family Values: A Call to Christian Virtue*, p. 19). I am not hearing any voices these days saying, "What's good for General Motors is good for America." Family values is a catch-all category for the traditions of behavior that happen to be on my list and has become something of a golden calf for right wing Christians.

Truth is, family traditions are not always good. Many deserve to be broken and exceeded. We have long debated the biblical mandate, "children obey your parents"; but all of us know of cases where parents are wrong. No child, and no wife, should be expected to submit willingly and joyfully to abuse. Perhaps you have read about "The Travelers," a community of con artists who move from town to town perpetuating fraud on unsuspecting victims. The Travelers have family values and a family code of ethics, but they would hardly be worthy of imitation.

But that is the extreme. Even healthy families, which we would all agree to be ideal, need to allow for exceptions. I do not doubt that Jesus came from a healthy household. Indeed, I believe that Mary and Joseph contributed to the shaping of his life and mission even when he took exception to their vision. Luke alludes to this exceptional person in the only statement we have about his childhood. He wandered from his family in the annual trek to the Temple and was found discussing the meaning of the faith with scholars. The preparation for his birth and the prophetic message about his ministry did not keep his parents from chiding him about separation from the family. Luke was setting the scene for the pain that would follow, when Jesus would have to be about his Father's business.

Perhaps the lesson here is about family values and the need to exceed them. Every human family is basically, well—human. That means imperfect, capable of more than they have accomplished, and ignorant about the potential that is within their ranks. Jesus may seem harsh in response to the word that his family is outside looking for him. He points to the surrounding community and identifies family, including mother and brothers, with those who do the will of God. The highest standard to which our children and grandchildren can be called is not the limitation of our own achievement, but the limit set only by the calling of God.