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Providence Presbyterian Church
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
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Isaiah 5:1-7; Luke 12:49-56

"What Was He Thinking?"

Jesus said, "I've come to bring fire! Do you think I've come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" And then he goes on to describe our families – 3 against 2, 2 against 3; fathers against sons, sons against fathers, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

Yikes! That is some passage, right? What in the world was Jesus thinking? And also, what in the world was I thinking by choosing this passage? This is one of those times when you come to church thinking you'll be all comfy and maybe even snooze a bit through the sermon, only to be accosted by the tough talk of Jesus. This part of Luke's gospel is what I call the tough talks of Jesus or the "Dutch uncle talk." It is truly his "Come to Jesus" moment with his followers.

He wants his followers to commit to faith with their eyes wide open about the consequences of following him. The first thing to which he points is divisions within our families. And we gasp – not because we aren't already divided but because Jesus had the temerity to call attention to what we know about our families.

We try to put up a good façade out in public, but in private we know that our families are closer to "South Park" than to "Leave It to Beaver." But we don't talk about that because it would ruin our image as a "normal" family. I have a friend who is fond of saying, "Normal is only a setting on a drier." There is little that is "normal" about our families.

We've got secrets; we've got dysfunction; we've got grudges; we've got disappointments; we've got blemishes; we've got addiction; we've got abuse; we've got divisions – and that's just my family! That's not to say that our families don't have positive things too. We've got love, and comfort, and encouragement, and joy, and celebration and loyalty, and harmony, too.

But when we portray our family with only the good things we betray who our families really are and perpetuate a myth that ideal families exist. Jesus called it like he saw it –

families are complicated and sometimes even combustible. I'm not telling you anything you don't already know because you are part of a family that is imperfect – and so am I.

Growing up my family seemed to others to have a solid foundation of love and devotion. But within the family we knew that my father was an alcoholic who had a habit of climbing on the wagon only to fall off multiple times. At home we were in near constant turmoil wondering what condition my father would arrive in. I rescued my father from bars and clubs, sometimes with the aid of the police or highway patrol. I tracked him down when he went on week-long benders and listened to his apologies and pledges to do better.

But through all that time, not one of my friends knew what I was going through because I was too ashamed to tell them. Not even my best friend knew. And you know what? That was a huge mistake – not sharing our dysfunction with anyone outside my family. I denied myself the opportunity for support and encouragement during a really tough time.

The primary reason that I prevented others from offering wisdom and comfort was my devotion to the notion of the perfect family. I was just sure that no one else had family troubles like I did. It has only been in later years that longtime friends and I compared notes about our families and realized that every family has its downfalls and divisions. Jesus recognized this as a fact of life and pointed to a much larger family which we join when we become followers of Christ.

As good as it is to be a part of this larger family of faith, it's not perfect either. Just take a look at how many denominations and groups there are in the Christian church – 45,000 in the world – and you will see that even the larger family of faith is divided. Jesus called that, too.

By the time that Luke wrote this gospel, some 40 years after the resurrection of Christ, division was already happening in the early church. Luke knew first-hand that following Jesus would cause turmoil because Jesus has different standards than we do. Luke also knew that following Jesus would cause divisions in our birth families.

Ask most anyone who is called to ministry and you will hear stories of family members who no longer talk to them or who think ministry is just a phase or who berate them for a poor career choice or who don't want to be around them because they fear being judged. That's not true for everyone but it is certainly true for quite a few of us minister-types. Jesus knew that following him has a cost and sometimes that cost is within our own families.

So why tell us that? Why not simply ignore this uncomfortable fact and let us find out for ourselves? For the same reason that we warn our children about crossing the street or not talking to strangers. We love them and want only the best for them, which means we have to prepare them for seen and unseen dangers. Jesus loves us so much that he warns

us of potential setbacks by drawing an analogy to our birth families, which we know all too well are fraught with difficulties. In doing so Jesus not only prepares us for possible consequences of our faith but also opens us to giving and receiving support and encouragement.

If we know and acknowledge that our birth family and even our faith family are less than perfect we will be more likely to share our concerns as well as our joys with other followers of Jesus. This opens us to become a true family of faith where we share our burdens and our joys. The third verse of the hymn “Blest Be The Tie That Binds” captures this spirit very well: “We share our mutual woes; our mutual burdens bear. And often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”

This faith family isn’t perfect but it does give us a framework for living with love and grace among people to whom we are tied. We’re very different, from different backgrounds, professions, ethnic groups and races, but God has called us into the church of Jesus Christ to be a family. God has put us here for a reason - to show the world what real family values are.

Politicians picked up on this terminology and ran it into the ground. With all due respect to our elected officials, I can think of no worse group of folks to talk about family values. It has become increasingly clear that our society doesn’t have a clue about what family values are. Madison Avenue teaches us that it’s being successful, driving the right car, drinking the right cola, and using the right deodorant.

Thumb through the Bible, looking for material on “family values” and you will have a rough go of it. In the sordid accounts of family life among the ancestors of our faith, we are hard-pressed to find supportive material for what we would call “family values.” The family life of our spiritual ancestors was as dysfunctional as any you would find today. In our spiritual lineage, there is enough infidelity, murder, mayhem, manipulation, back-stabbing, in-fighting, greed, and lust to make a Hollywood producer blush.

Therefore, we are taken out of our biological families, adopted and baptized into a much more expansive family - the church. Within the church we call people who otherwise would have been strangers, “sister,” or “brother.” This faith family is intended to be a contrast to our birth family. Our faith family knows no social, economic, racial, or political boundaries.

Here is a family in which grandma doesn’t live “over the river and through the woods” but rather in Seoul, Rome, Nairobi and Cartagena. Everyone in this family of faith is a sister or brother with whom we work to bring God’s kingdom a little closer to reality. That’s the family we value. It’s also the family we choose.

We don't get to choose our biological families - which explains why some families are so odd. Some families just seem to fit together so nicely, and then there are other families which seem to be mis-fits. If you are part of a "fit" family, praise God. If you are part of a "mis-fit" family, which you didn't choose, praise God that you have another family which you can choose - the family of faith.

It is comforting to know that God has a plan that includes the family of faith - the church. We need to broadcast this good news to our community and the world. We've got a family for everyone - no one needs to be an orphan in this cruel world. Here is a place where you are accepted as you are but are not left there; where you can give and receive encouragement; where you can share woes and joys; where you can love and be loved; where you can serve and be served; where you can commune with God and others.

Take a look around you. Who do you see? I see your children, grandchildren, parents, grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, brothers and sisters in faith. Most don't have the same blood as you but all were saved by the blood of Jesus Christ who died so that we might live in a family that embodies love and grace.

That's what everybody is looking for - a family which values us - no matter how young - no matter how old - no matter how educated - no matter how impoverished - no matter what race - no matter what ancestry - no matter what socio-economic class - no matter what label society slaps on us. This is a place where we belong. We are family. When we wonder what Jesus was thinking when he instructed his disciples, this is it. We are family.

Occasionally, common language changes a bit. One of those changes I've heard lately is used by employees in businesses when greeting customers - "Welcome in." Grammatically it drives me crazy to hear it, but it does convey a sense of hospitality which is sorely lacking in today's world. So, I'll use this phrase to demonstrate that we are family - all of us, no matter who we are, what we have done or failed to do. Welcome in. Welcome in - to the family.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen