

What Does the Bible Say About ... Family?
Rev. Brian R. Louis, Faith Presbyterian Church
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I'm going to start out with a quote from the Bible. And I'm going to test your knowledge of the Bible.

"If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple." Luke 14:26

Who said that? What did he mean? That is from the King James Version. Similarly, from the NRSV, it states, "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." That's one of the things Jesus said about family. Many scholars agree that is what Jesus actually said because it was so radical, so jarring, so extreme. Why would someone make that up as something Jesus said? The gospel writers were trying to make him look good, not radical and complex. This verse flies in the face of the "love one another as I have loved you" message of Jesus, doesn't it? Does Jesus really mean to hate your parents and brothers and sisters? and what does he mean by hate?

It could be you must take action, to act like you hate them, meaning leaving them behind, and moving entirely in Christ to be his disciple. Perhaps Jesus was using that as an example of how much you must sacrifice to be his disciple. You must leave everything behind to follow him. Everything. Perhaps he was speaking to us that way, the way he spoke to his apostles when he called them. He asked them to drop everything and come follow him.

Perhaps he said hate just as an attention getter. Jesus was a master teacher and preacher. He used parables to teach people, he issued commands, and sometimes he said things that I think were radical just to get people's attention. Maybe this was one such occasion.

This is just one example of what the Bible says about family. This verse is certainly not coming to a Christian bookstore near you as a bookmark anytime soon. But it's something that the Bible says about family, and we can't ignore it, as much as we may want to.

The Bible says a ton about family. There are verses to show you how to behave with family, there are the commandments that order us to be good children and honor our father and mother and to be good spouses and not commit adultery. But there are just as many sayings and stories that show how tough family can be, how unusual family can be, and how family is not like the Cleaver family in the late 50s early 60s TV show "Leave it to Beaver."¹

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leave_it_to_Beaver

One of the important things about Biblical interpretation is asking ourselves what could the text say to us about our lives today more than two thousand years after Jesus? For example, I think our New Testament scripture lesson from today says something to us in our current time about mental health and family. The scripture says Jesus' family was worried about his sanity. People were telling his mother and brothers – and perhaps sisters, depending on which ancient text you're reading —that they thought he had gone out of his mind. Surely, if someone said something like that they would be worried about him for they came to him to see what was wrong. Scholar Paul Duff notes that they try to scuttle his activities and they were embarrassed and unsympathetic to his activities because it seemed they didn't believe in him. They didn't think he was a prophet and miracle worker.² To them, perhaps, he was just their son and brother, and according to Mark's account, they thought he was losing it with its proclamations and his public ministry. Heck, some of the elders thought he was possessed by the devil.

Whose mental health in your family have you worried about? Have you worried about your children? Your grandchildren? Your spouse? Have you worried about yourself?

In a community with so many veterans, there are scores of people, including some in this congregation I suspect, who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. There are also plenty of non-veterans who suffer from PTSD who were not in combat. Perhaps they suffered abuses by family members growing up. I doubt there is a family out there that has not been touched by someone in the family suffering from sort of mental health issue.

If you didn't come from a "perfect" family, you're not alone. No one has. No family is perfect. And I think that is what the Bible tells us. Scripture shows us how complicated family can be. The Bible is a reflection on us all. All our families, not just our immediate families, but those of our extended families, uncles, aunts, and cousins. When we read the Bible we sometimes see reflections of us in the stories there.

What was Jesus' immediate family like? God chose teenage unwed Mary to be the mother of Jesus, the son of God. Who is Jesus' earthly father? What about Joseph? In Mark, the earliest gospel, there is no mention of Joseph at all. Was he dead by the time Jesus was an adult? Was there a Joseph at all? To be fair, the gospel writers were not writing a biography of Jesus in the way we understand biography today, so it isn't that unusual that details of his biography are left out. Jesus had brothers, and possibly sisters, according to scripture. After Jesus' death his brother James became a prominent leader in the Jerusalem church. Duff suggests Jesus' family were not followers of Jesus until after his death. In Mark, Jesus' family is barely mentioned. And Mark was a gospel which was a source for Matthew and Luke which were written decades later.

What else do the gospels tell us about family? In Matthew 8:21-22, there is the story of the guy says he wants to join Jesus, but he asks for a little time before he does so in order to bury his father. Jesus says, no way. "Let the dead bury their dead."

² Duff, 143.

On its face, Jesus doesn't sound like a big proponent of family values does he? That's the thing about scripture, isn't it? There are surprises all over the place.

The stories of family in the Old Testament aren't that positive either at times. Or they don't fit in a neat little box the way our families don't fit in neat little boxes. They aren't all about people helping people or doing what we would consider moral things. In Genesis, the first family in the Bible has the story of Cain killing his brother Abel. Brother kills brother.

Later in Genesis, we have the story of Ishmael. Sarai tells Abram to have a kid with their Egyptian slave Hagar since she could not conceive, and so Hagar bears Abram a son, Ishmael. Talk about an odd family dynamic.

In Ruth, ch. 1:15-18 and 22; Naomi and Elimelech leave Judah because of famine and they go to the land of Moab. Their two sons intermarry with Moabites. They marry Ruth and Oprah. After the men die, Naomi wants to go back to Judah and be with her people. The women want to go with her, but she tells them no. Oprah stays, but Ruth clings to Naomi, and Naomi brings her back with her to Judah. Naomi's family has been altered forever, and Ruth is her new family.

Family in the Bible is complex. It's not all one thing. Family in the bible is like family in real life. It can be messy. It can be unusual. It can be non-conformist. It's not just a mother and father and a couple of kids.

And in our New Testament lesson today, Jesus expands his definition of who is his family. His mother and brothers are those who do the will of God. Jesus tells us we are family with him if we do the will of God.

There are endless versions of what constitutes a family. There are stepchildren. There are single parents. It's aunts and uncles raising their nieces and nephews. There are parents estranged from their children and grandchildren. What the bible shows is that family is messy and multifaceted.

Family can be hard. Family can be judgmental. Family can be vindictive. If your family doesn't fit in a neat little box a la Beaver Cleaver's family, you're not alone. If you have trouble with parents or kids, you're not alone. If your family has had scandal, and whose family has not had some scandal, public or private, you're not alone.

The verse of Jesus telling his disciples to hate their parents and the rest of their families so they can become his followers – this radical command of Jesus – reminds me I have and have had earthly parents, but it also makes me think of the most important relationship I have, and that it is to our ultimate parent, God. God is our source of comfort, strength, guidance. We are the children of God. In this verse Jesus is grabbing our attention and commanding us to be disciples. Committed disciples of him. Committed disciples of God. Committed disciples of the Divine, who has many names,

but the one I want to remember today is God our parent, our father. The giver of life. Let's all remember to keep that relationship with the Lord foremost in our lives, for out of that relationship, flows everything else. I think that perhaps was what Jesus wanted us to focus on the most. We are the children of God, our ultimate family, for it is into God's presence, we will ultimately return. May it be so. Amen.