



“JESUS AND FAMILY VALUES”

Luke 12:49-56

Lectionary 20 C

August 18, 2019

Our Saviour Lutheran Church

West Lafayette, Indiana

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The family is the single most important influence on the lives of children. We love our families. We would die for our families. If your family was threatened or your children were in danger, you might even kill to protect them. There appears to be no limit to our love for our families, even if it means sacrificing ourselves for them.

Why? Because our family is the source of our name, our values, and our identity. Our family is where we go when we have absolutely nowhere else to go. Our family takes us in when everyone else has rejected us.

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that churches want to be known as “family friendly.” Churches have “family night suppers,” build “family life centers” and hire staff to concentrate on youth and “family life.” A major reason many people give for joining a church is to support their family.

However, it hasn't always been this way in this history of the Christian Church. We forget that over the centuries the church has always had a deeply ambiguous opinion of the family.

Roman society criticized the early Christians for dividing and destroying families. Think for a moment when Jesus called the Sons of Zebedee to be his disciples. When Jesus called, they simply walked away from their family fishing business and left their father standing there with the fishing nets. The story does not tell us what their father thought about his two sons leaving the family business and tagging along after this wandering rabbi named Jesus. Family ties were unimportant in comparison to following Jesus. Jesus must have broken the hearts of many a first century family.

In a letter written to a Roman government official in the 3rd century, a parent complains that his son, who had received the best education, gone to all the right schools, and was headed for a good job as a lawyer, had gotten involved with a weird religious sect. He griped that the members of this sect controlled his son's every move, told him whom to date and had taken all of his money. The parent pleads with the government official to do something about this weird religious group. After all, nothing is more important than family and certainly not in comparison to the claims of some religious group. The parent was not complaining about some spooky religious commune but . . . the Christians!

Listen to what Jesus has to say about the family in today's Gospel:

“Do you think that I have come to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!

From now on five in one household will be divided:

*father against son and son against father,
mother against daughter and daughter against mother,
mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law
against mother-in-law.”*

Jesus' words shock us in an age when the family is sacred. Why did he utter these harsh words? Because we like our first century counterparts are “hypocrites.” We are pretending to be something we are not.

We are all for “family values” and then nervously hope that no one notices our failures. Just when we thought we had our lives in order, our ducks all lined up and all the shingles nailed down, Jesus upsets the applecart.

What we deeply value turns out to be a flawed investment. Marriages crumble. Children let us down. Parents who were always there for us can no longer remember who they are. The families we thought we could always count on slip away like sand through our fingers. Family cannot deliver us from our bad choices. Family cannot protect us from the lump in the wrong place, the disturbing phone call at 3 a.m. or stunning news that we no longer have job . . . or a place on the team. Family cannot save us. Only Jesus can.

That is why Jesus must go to the cross. That is why Jesus must be baptized.

But we thought that Jesus' baptism had already been baptized by John in the Jordan River. What is this baptism that is yet to come?

We have domesticated the New Testament picture of baptism. We have tried to tame what is a wild storm. We think that baptism refers to that day when we were washed with water or dipped in the font. When we think of washing, we think of washing our hands in the sink or getting a quick morning shower. However, the New Testament picture of baptism is much more dramatic. Baptism is not simply a washing. To be baptized is to be overwhelmed and swept away in a wild flood. When Jesus speaks of his coming baptism, he will be swept away in a wild torrent and drowned. It will be his baptism by fire and destruction not only for the world but for him. On that day he will die on the cross.

There we catch a glimpse of the amazing love of God. Baptism dramatizes a love that is like no other. Unlike the sappy sentimentalism or the permissive indifference that passes for love in our world, God will not look away and ignore our misplaced loyalties, our misguided lives and mistaken choices. We have trusted in everything but the God who gave us life. We deserve to be cast into the fire or drowned in a flood. For God to ignore the wrongs we have done trivializes God's love for us. God is not the sleepy old man in the sky who doesn't care what we do. God is not an indulgent parent who is unwilling to set boundaries for a belligerent child. God cares too much to just look away and ignore the wreckage in our lives.

Instead God does a most a amazing thing. God in Jesus gathers up the wreckage in our lives and this world and carries it to the cross. There he suffers the consequences. With arms outstretched, Jesus dies “for us.” There on the cross Jesus is baptized, drowned and swept away into the watery hell that eventually engulfs all of us. There God is submerged in the depths of our humanity all the way to the grave. God loves us that much.

However, that is not the end of God’s love. The cross was not just the tragic end of a heart rending love story. Three days later, God raised Jesus from the dead. God declares that Jesus’ fate is “for us and our salvation.” When we were washed in the font of Baptism, we died and rose with Jesus. Jesus’ fate and destiny became ours. We have already passed through the fires of judgment and have been raised to a new life. God gave us a place with all the angels and company of heaven. Even though our lives in this world have been flawed, broken and forgettable, we will forever be the apple of God’s eye.

Our earthly families may leave us disappointed, but now we are part of a new family. The baptismal font standing in the center of the sanctuary reminds us of that fact. It is there in the waters of baptism that God, the creator of the universe, became our father, our daddy. There we entered a new family. There we gained a new big brother, Jesus. There we received new brothers and sisters all over the world. There today in the waters of baptism, God gave us a new sister, Elizabeth Bulthuis. Elizabeth, welcome to the family!

Today our family gathers to eat and drink. Jesus serves us his supper. We have a place at his table no matter what. We may come to the table with our lives soiled, our consciences burdened, ashamed of ourselves and our families, embarrassed by our hypocrisy. Nevertheless, there he offers us the body that was broken and the blood that was shed **FOR US**. He values us that much!

Our membership in this family (as Jesus reminds us in today’s Gospel) does “divide” and separate us from the rest of the world. When we came here and walked through those doors this morning, we made a choice. We could have stayed home, gone to the golf course, watched the Sunday morning news shows. But we didn’t. We left that behind because we value being here with this family. It was a sacrifice that we wanted to make.

However, when this service is over, we won’t stay here. Belonging to this family means that we go back into the world to heal, restore and strengthen other families that are struggling with the burdens of life. That is what this family values. Because Christ has made us members of this family, we value . . . welcoming the stranger, taking time to listen to another instead of always spewing our own opinions, seeking to do our best when everyone around us only wants to get by, trying to do what is right, true and honest instead of what is merely expedient, willing to face up to our sins when the rest of the world tries to hide them, living life with generosity and kindness instead of always looking to “What is in it for me!”

This is what Jesus and his family value.