

FIRE AND REIGN OF GOD

*a sermon by The Rev. Scott Dalgarno delivered on August 14, 2022
based on Luke 12:49-56*

Part of me wishes this were not in the Bible.

Do we need reasons to set family members against family members, especially a reason decreed by Jesus ?

Some of us feel pretty darn fragmented when it comes to family, especially right now..

Speaking personally, in my growing up, extended family was a revolving door at our house. People came in for a while. Then we didn't see them, maybe for years.

"What happened to Aunt Amy," I'd ask my dad. "You'll have to ask your mother," he'd say. I figured that's the way all families did it until I found out that though *many* did it that way, it wasn't all, by a long shot.

This can be very painful stuff. Some people define themselves by their status in the family, whether they are in or out. Whether they measure up in a father's eyes or not.

You know, no one knows how to hurt us the way family members do. They had all those years to go to school on us. The memories are so deep, the shared history so powerful. It's no wonder we get a little sick sometimes just thinking about it all.

And when we return home, say for Thanksgiving, no matter how old we are, we're always 17 again, and we all wonder how the expectations of a mother or a father can make us behave once again like a stuttering adolescent.

And when we watch films featuring perfect families behaving with tact and humor at dinner and what looks like such genuine love, it's hard not to feel terribly defeated, no matter what your family's circumstances.

I remember working out at a gym I once frequented. A TV was on in the stationary bike area and this guy was watching a day-time court show and this young man was “suing” his mother because she had stolen his SSI checks for 6 years. It got really ugly and this fellow who watching looked at me and said, “There’s no hardball like family hardball.”

Jesus knew how powerful families are in our lives, whether they are working well or not at all, whether we have snuggled down deep in the bosom of them or whether we are terribly estranged.

His struggle with his own family is highlighted in the third chapter of the gospel of *Mark*. There crowds gather at his house in Capernaum to hear him teach.

He has been so successful in attracting multitudes that the house is full and there is not even room for them to eat together. Soon, word gets out that Jesus is endangering his own life.

He is saying things that are getting him into deep trouble with the religious authorities. It is clear that his days are numbered and yet he continues to say things openly that incite some among the Pharisees. Therefore, people conclude that he must be carzy. Oddly, even his family seems to believe this report. His mother and his brothers come looking for him.

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'

And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

I wonder if perhaps his family might have overheard those words, windows being what they were in the first century. How painful it must have been for them.

Jesus didn't come from an idyllic family situation.

Things were similar for the young Buddha according to this story from the Buddhist tradition:

“When the Buddha returned home after his enlightenment he was rebuked by his father for being an unseemly beggar. His noble father had raised his son to rule and enjoy all the finer things of life and his son had chosen the life of a beggar. His father and his stepmother demanded that he stop being a monk, change his clothes and return to his princely duties. When the Buddha tried to explain they dismissed his understanding as worthless.

So he merely performed a miracle – floating in the air while spouting both fire and water to convince them that he had learned something of value.”
(in *After The Ecstasy, The Laundry*, by Jack Kornfield).

Don't you wish you could have done that as a kid when your parents refused to let you stay out past 11:00pm with your teenage friends?

Some years back, the NY Times columnist Anna Quindlen wrote a kind of love letter to her father on Father's Day. In the column she talked about the simultaneous blessing and curse of being her father's first child.

“I was raised as my father's oldest son," she says, detailing his high expectations of her and how she learned to value herself the way her father valued her: for her mind, for her achievements, for her reflection of him.

Then one day she stopped -- realizing all of a sudden that he and she were two separate people, not mirror images, and much to her surprise, she found that she loved him more, after that revelation, than before. "His expectations were hard on me," she wrote, "but they took me places where I would never have gone otherwise. A curse and a blessing all in one."

She says, "We might as well have a universal support group [called] Adult Children of Parents."

Sometimes, we ourselves are the impediment to finding family. I mean, look, sometimes the family we need is right there in our midst.

Listen to this story told by Jan Parker of British Columbia about her own coming-to-terms with being a step-daughter:

On the day Jack married our mother, my brother Art and I threw the birdseed overhand in hopes of hitting our new stepfather in the eye or at least stinging his skin. We sang a song under our breath, "Hit the road Jack, and don't you come back."

But Mom seemed happy. Whatever. I never really paid attention to how she felt.

I remember vaguely the night she woke me to tell me Jack had proposed. She was excited and wanted to share it with me, her daughter. I mumbled something and went back to sleep. I was twelve.

Jack called me, "kid." I called him "Old man." He was a cowboy, uneducated but wise. We bet each other a dollar on the World Series each year. One time we went to Santa Fe together to play the ponies. We used our winnings to buy a steak dinner, and when mom asked where we'd been. Jack didn't tell her. It was our secret.

In 1971 my grandmother died, and we went to New York to the funeral. Mom stayed on to be with family, and Jack and I flew home together. We ran into detours and a snowstorm; the six hour trip took close to twenty-seven. Through it all Jack never ranted or complained. I felt safe.

During my divorce, he took me out for drinks and supported me. . . . I never felt judged by him.

Every Sunday during my weekly phone call to mom, she would make Jack and me talk. We acted as if it was a bother.

"Hey old man, what's up?"

"Nothing. You?"

"Nothing."

"OK, love you kid. Stay out of trouble."

When Jack called after mom's heart attack, he said there was no need for me to come home. She would be fine. She'd always taken care of him, and now it was his turn to take care of her, he said.

When mom died he said, "Come now, Jan." I came and Jack and I cried in each other's arms. "What will we do?" he asked over and over again. "What will we do?"

I'll be 50 soon. I've known Jack for 37 years, and though I hated him at first, I've loved him for most of that time. After all, he's been like a father to me."

You know, we do not have to "hate" our families. The truth about Luke's church family (that's where this morning's text was first aimed, you know), the truth about them was that many of them were already estranged from their families.

In Luke's time, it was the custom of whole households to adopt the faith of the head of the family.

Everyone in the family was compelled to follow the lead of the leader – spouses, children, servants, everyone – so if one of the underlings in the family decided to become a Christian it was nothing short of a betrayal. Especially since becoming Christian had all sorts of consequences.

It might mean selling all that a person owned and giving it to the poor. It might mean beginning to associate with a whole new class of people that included outlaws and slaves. It would most likely mean bringing the whole household under the scrutiny of the Roman Empire.

There were plenty of people sitting in Luke's congregation who had already been shown the door by their families for following Jesus.

So when Luke told them what Jesus said about hating their families it might not have frightened them as much as it does us.

They found comfort in those words, just as they found new family among the others sitting around them in church, ESPECIALLY, when they heard THAT PASSAGE about Jesus and his family we read earlier.

It was as though he had known what would happen to them and reassured them ahead of time.

Barbara Brown Taylor has said, “Jesus did not despise the family. But he did redefine it. For him, family was not a matter of whose chromosomes you carry around inside you, but whose image you are created in.

It was not a matter of who has the same last name or who 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.”

This fresh perspective can open the world to us. Consider the freshly retired coach of Duke University basketball, Mike Krzyzewski (“Sheshevski”).

He gave a talk once to the Duke University Retirees Association and told them about a friend of his in Southern California who is coaching a team where out of 15 kids, 10 of them have never known a father. Ten out of fifteen. He said as a result, this man and his assistant coaches were spending more time trying to be father figures to the players than their coaches.

Then Krzyzewski said this to the retirees gathered there, “Things are in too big a mess in the American family for you people to be sitting around playing bridge, or thinking of moving to some retirement community in Florida. We need you. We need your wisdom, your patience, your free time. We need you to be adopting kids, stepping up and taking responsibility for kids that, while they may *not* be your own, they are all of our responsibility.”

Today we live in a different world with different consequences for being Christian than Luke's congregation. But we still have a deep genetic desire for kinship.

Some of us find this in our families and some of us do not.

And, you know, the church (and *this* church, in particular) exist in no small degree to take up the slack in a world where we move about so much, or are separated from family for other reasons.

I want to end with a short reflection on a much discussed piece David Brooks wrote for the Atlantic in 2020. The essay has a provocative title: "The Nuclear Family was a Mistake."

He opens with a discussion of Barry Levinson's 1990 film, *Avalon*, based on Levinson's childhood in Baltimore. Five brothers came to America from Eastern Europe around the time of World War I. They built a wallpaper business. For a while they did everything together, like in the old country. But as the movie goes along, the extended family begins to split apart. Some members move to the suburbs for more privacy and space. One leaves for a job in a different state. The big blowup comes over something that seems trivial but isn't:

The eldest of the brothers arrives late to a Thanksgiving dinner to find that the family has begun the meal without him.

"You cut the turkey without me?" he cries. "Your own flesh and blood! ... You cut the turkey?"

Here's how David Brooks, viewed it: *The pace of life is speeding up. Convenience, privacy, and mobility are more important than family loyalty. "The idea that they would eat before the brother arrived was a sign of disrespect," Levinson told me recently when I asked him about that scene. "That was the real crack in the family. When you violate the protocol, the whole family structure begins to collapse."*

Here is how David ends his essay ..

When we discuss the problems confronting the country, we don't talk about family enough ... The blunt fact is that the nuclear family has been crumbling in slow motion for decades, and many of our other problems— with education, mental health, addiction, the quality of the labor force— stem from that crumbling.

We've left behind the nuclear-family paradigm of 1955. For most people it's not coming back. Americans are hungering to live in extended and forged families, in ways that are new and ancient at the same time. This is a significant opportunity, a chance to thicken and broaden family relationships, a chance to allow more adults and children to live and grow under the loving gaze of a dozen pairs of eyes, and be caught, when they fall, by a dozen pairs of arms.

For decades we have been eating at smaller and smaller tables, with fewer and fewer kin. It's time to find ways to bring back the big tables.

"A crowd was sitting around [Jesus]; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?'

And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother. "

Amen.