

FAMILY VALUES



Luke 12:49 "Jesus said, 'I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled! I have a baptism with which to be baptized, and what stress I am under until it is completed! Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they 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.'"

Whew! Jesus does not always say or do what we expect him to. Just about the time we think we have him all figured out, he does or says something utterly surprising. Today's reading from the Gospel is just one of those occasions, with its talk of division and fire and family members becoming pitted against themselves. And yet biblical scholars have told us that those passages which are not what we would expect to find are most likely the more authentic ones. So, what are we to think here?

Well in 1998, at the Faith and Family Dinner in Florida, Pat Robertson, the founder of the Christian Broadcasting Network and Regent University in Virginia Beach, was honored because of his strong stance in favor of so called "Family Values." I was the Rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Olde town Portsmouth, Virginia at the time, and felt surrounded by conservative Christians and their values. Beside Pat in neighboring Virginia Beach, we had Jerry Falwell with Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia, co-founder of the Moral Majority. Then there was Ralph Reed, who was from Portsmouth himself, busy establishing the new Christian Coalition.

Family values, we were told again and again, are fundamental Christian values. And in this age of the breakdown of the nuclear family, more and more people saw the loss of family values as a threat to the survival of our society as we have known it. Thus, family values became an important political issue then, and sadly I hear echoes of it again among Christian Nationalists since the overturning of Roe versus Wade, including suggestions of repealing the Supreme Court's ruling allowing interracial marriage, the use of contraception, and gay marriage, calling homosexuals abominations, and demeaning trans-gender individuals in our communities. And though the exact definitions of what 'family values' is may differ from person to person, we usually agree that they stand for strengthening of the nuclear family as a

fundamental basis for a strong community. Few would disagree with that, although Jesus might be one of them.

Jesus was not supporter of what our generation usually calls "strong family values." As a thirty-something Jewish man who never married or had children, Jesus was unusual even in his own day in a Jewish culture that highly valued family. The Scriptures also report that Jesus was conceived out of wedlock and estranged from his own family. His father was absent from the scene in his later years. And in John's Gospel, his brothers openly admit they didn't believe in him and mock him. And Jesus' recorded conversations with his mother are few and abrupt. Indeed, on one occasion Jesus' family actually tried to physically restrain him believing that Jesus was literally out of his mind. And Jesus' remarkable response to this was to declare, "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples at his feet, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" On another occasion Jesus scolded a potential follower for wanting to first go back and bury his father. And elsewhere, Jesus said that anyone who loves his father or mother more than him is not worthy of him.

Jesus was at odds with many of the community values of his day. For instance, he spoke openly with the Samaritan woman at the well, astounding even his own disciples in doing so. He healed the

daughter of the Syro-Phoenician woman, an enemy of his people, and the slave of a Roman Centurion, occupiers of the Jewish State. Elsewhere Jesus allowed a woman who was a known sinner to bathe his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair and then kissing them while at dinner the house of Simon the Pharisee. Jesus openly broke the Sabbath law and publicly criticized and mocked the religious and political leaders of his day, violently overturning the tables in the Temple, and chasing out the moneychangers with a whip, while meanwhile allowing a woman thought to be a prostitute to be a principle follower of his, and to provide for his care.

And now in today's Gospel, Jesus declares that he has come bringing not peace, but a sword, dividing family members against one and another, father against son, mother against daughter-in-law. --- When Jesus tells us that he brings, not peace, but a sword, I do not pretend to understand exactly what he meant, --- though I do know that Jesus at least meant that his life and ministry would change the way we do things. For the presence of God transforms our lives, turns the world upside down and causes new relationships to form. Such fundamental changes can and have upset people over the centuries. Each time we become accustomed to one modification, to seeing some valued tradition eroded or erased, another change seems calls us to yet another new response. The traditional biblical concept of marriage, for example, which

was polygamy by the way, finally gave way to monogamy. Now marriage between a man and a woman has given way to marriage amongst gays and lesbians. Shocking? No! The Christian Church has indeed witnessed numerous dramatic social changes over the years; including the demise of the Divine Right of Kings, the abolition of slavery, the acceptance of usury, the emancipation of women. What's next? Family values?

Jesus' ministry did indeed create a new family of sorts, a family based not upon blood lines or clan, but upon faith and belief in God and a different way of living together, and treating one another. Astonishingly, many of Jesus' disciples left their own homes, and their own families, and their own friends and business partners; they left everything to follow Jesus. Many of them wandered about the countryside together with him for years, shared meals with one another, and thus fashioned new lives together, and created a new family to replace their old ones; they created the family of God.

After Jesus' death and resurrection, his disciples drew even closer, hiding together behind closed doors and fearing for their lives, a tight knit group that continued to stay together after his ascension, a group that grew and attracted many new members. Jesus' mother and brother are suddenly named as among those following Jesus after his death. And like a family, Jesus' disciples looked after one another and cared for one another, as

Jesus had done for them before. We are told that among the members of the earliest known established church, the one in Jerusalem, "no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common" (Acts 4.33). "There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need" (Acts 4.35). The order of Deacons was created in the early church to help the Twelve apostles serve the tables of the growing family so that none among their company would be overlooked in the daily distribution of food (Acts 6.1). Moreover, the Christian community continued to welcome, as Jesus had done before them, the outcast and the downtrodden of society. For in Christ, we are told distinction, there was no Greek or Jew, no slave or free, no male or female. For all are one in Christ Jesus, in this new family of God.

Moreover, there was a special obligation in the early church to care for the widows and orphans, that is, for those who had no other family, those for whom the Church was their only family. Jesus may not have been particularly close to his own family, but he inspired the family values of love and care and concern for another among his followers, especially caring for the broken and dispossessed. The Christian church itself founded many of the caring institutions that we now take for granted in our society

today. It was the church that established the earliest hospitals, alms houses, and orphanages, and the first prisons, and more recently the first hospices. Christianity moved beyond the tribalism of the past, towards a universalization of family values such as love and care and concern for one and another. In a world that is currently torn apart by political and ethnic special interests, Christianity needs to be actively spreading this message of a universal family of God, where we are all one in Christ, where we respect the dignity of every human being, seeking and serving all persons by our words and examples, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Thousands upon thousands upon thousands through the centuries have joined that family of God and continued that ministry. We continue that ministry, caring for one another, for our friends and neighbors, for the strangers and refugees in our midst. We gather food for the hungry in our Food Drives and support our hospitals with our Blood Drives as we work together with the other religious congregations of Washington as part of that larger family of God. We organize school supplies for needy children, Thanksgiving baskets for poor families, and Christmas gifts for disadvantaged children. We seek to love and care for one another as the Christ did for us, not just for our nuclear family, not just for those who look like us, share our politics or socio-economic statuses, those who speak the same language as we do, but

for all who share our common humanity, especially the poor and the needy. Those are the 'family values' that we espouse as Christians, and as Jesus said, the world shall know we are his disciples by our love. Amen.