

## **“FAMILY VALUES, REVISITED”**

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“Hey, Jesus, your mom and brothers are outside waiting for you, calling for you. Better head home.” Jesus was dining after a draining day of banishing torment from the disturbed, healing the filthy sick, and forgiving unsavory characters. The difference he made caused such a stir that the house was thronged with people.

“Who said they are my family? Who are my mother and who are my brothers, after all?” Jesus replied. “Anyone who does my will, anybody who gets on board with the God movement starting to unfold, *those* women and men are my family.” That was a little different, wasn’t it? Flying in the face of what society cherishes most? Jesus wasn’t sentimental about family. He didn’t agree with what Disney, TV situation comedies or the Christian right ‘family values’ folks say about family.

Jesus had the crazy idea family doesn’t begin with painting the nursery, the scrapbook with the little fingerprints, and baby’s first haircut. Jesus believed that family begins as before God we present ourselves—young or old—for the waters of baptism to be forgiven, claimed, favored, blessed, and commissioned by God.

Those who took their comfort in the status quo, who found their meaning and identity in the older order, had the hardest time with this. I speak of Jesus’ blood relatives and temple authorities who saw him as off on a strange spiritual bender. Imagine. Those closest to Jesus who should have first accepted his great inversion of this world and tilting toward God’s new order were the last to finally get it.

So there sat Jesus inside, trying to finish his dinner, with his new family, a ragged cast of well-meaning misfits and clueless followers along with all manner of Jews and Gentiles, ne’er-do-wells and working stiffs, tax collectors and sexual misfits. You can see the image, can’t you? And it is not Norman Rockwell we are seeing.

I don’t doubt for a minute that Jesus loved Mary and his siblings. But he came to us to lift up a higher love than the biological family, which can be territorial, tribal, and mostly interested in helping first, last, and only those who are like ourselves. Jesus wanted us to know there is another family, not based on blood but water. The church is the one place upon earth where water is actually thicker than blood.

Did you ever notice how little the Gospels say about Jesus’ biological family? He evidently had no few brothers and sisters. They play a remarkably negligible role. By contrast, in the Koran, we learn all about Mohammed’s family. Matthew, Mark, Luke and John knew they were beside the point. The point is the spiritual family.

Pretty subversive stuff, really. Then again, Jesus was no more subversive toward family than toward the religious establishment—pastors like me—or government authorities, money, success or deifying the world’s status quo. For him, all gets

subordinated to his mission; nothing matters more than loving and obeying God.

We sit up and take notice as Jesus devalues what we put above everything else. I recall as a boy, my mother stringing up the arriving Christmas cards, depicting the fugitive family of Joseph and Mary following the star others seem to miss. Or Joseph hovering over Mary with child below in the manger, angel above. Today Christmas cards feature *our* natty families smiling and reclining at a resort in Vail.

The gospels tell the story of Jesus' razor sharp focus shepherding and gathering the lost sheep of Israel. Jesus left his own family behind to form a new family not based on DNA kinship—the family form most we hold sacred. Family for him is about God's gracious, barrier-breaking summons, apart from any worldly status.

Jesus believed in this so much he willingly got into deep trouble for it, even crucified for it. Jesus outraged society's most upright elements by keeping open table fellowship with undesirables, calling the lost, orphaned and homeless into the one home they might experience in this life. One of the earliest, most cutting, and persistent complaints about Jesus was, "This man eats and drinks with sinners."

Even as Jesus bled and died in agony on a cross, he invited a guilty outcast, a suddenly repentant thief, to join him and his family—his new family—in paradise. Did you ever notice that the parable of the Lost Sheep is generally one of the favorites of so many people? We sense that it gets to the heart of the Jesus matter.

I'll be honest, as a pastor I've spent a lot of time helping others recover from what family has done to them. A college chaplain told me of a young lady, with no church background, who wanted to study for the ministry only upon having attended morning chapel at college. "Whatever would make you want to do that?" the chaplain asked, surprised. "Oh, I don't know. My own family is pretty messed up. As near as I can tell, Jesus and the church give me a second shot at family."

Again, the epicenter for family values within Christ's church is that baptismal font. That is where we say to the parents, no matter how well you have boned up on giving these children everything they need, we know that you are not enough to raise them to be the people God wants them to be. Nobody is enough alone. Therefore, we will adopt your child and take responsibility with you to raise them.

We are unlike Judaism in that nobody can be born into Christianity. We are all *adopted* into this spiritual family. So I want you to look at Yasiana and Nijah, now twice adopted in their short lives, as a living symbol for how we all come to God. Every time you think of them, these beautiful little girls, picture the grace of Hazel and Steve with their hearts on a roller coaster for over three years, waiting to embrace and receive the two of them as their own, to nurture and launch them into life. The Lord God has even more grace and blessing to adopt all who come unto him.

As we are washed in the waters of baptism, we're reborn into another life, a do-over like the would-be seminarian suspected, adopted into a God-shaped family. The Apostle Paul wrote to Rome, an empire where biological family defined and limited everything, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. ...You have received a spirit of *adoption*. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and heirs."

This all means a great deal to me, not only for theological reasons, but because my mother lives in Florida, my older brother in Louisiana, my younger brother in California, and my father is gone. You'd think we don't like each other, but we do. We miss each other very much. Jobs and opportunity just played out that way.

You are family to me in a real sense, and I am grateful. I am grateful to God first, for creating the body of Christ, but I also thank you. When my dad was failing, even though I was new and way behind—as a solo pastor in this busy church I've been behind for four years—you said, "Don't think twice, go and visit him. Do it now. Go!" And one of you even preached for me...During the three excruciating months leading up to my back surgery, and I could only work four hours a day and restrict myself to pastoral emergencies, you quieted those who felt I just didn't care...When I found the love of my life and wanted to share it--because joy only becomes joyous when shared--you gathered with me in this meetinghouse.

When I shared my career-long personal calling, to build homes with those having nothing, you honored me by going with me to the ends of the earth to participate. Seventeen of you have signed up to do so again in the hinterlands of Costa Rica. That feels even more like Jesus' take on family, inviting in the least and forgotten.

Steve and Hazel share similar feelings for you in a different walk over three years of needles and pins waiting, waiting for the two little girls to become *their* girls. It wasn't just how you received Yasiana and Nijah and the many meals you sent at Hazel's serious car crash. It was walking alongside them during endless waiting, checking in with them, never forgetting them, helping them feel less alone. Thanking you for that is the basis of the party and lunch in our Parish Hall today.

I don't mean to idealize or sentimentalize church as family when the gospels are achingly honest about how Jesus circle failed and abandoned him at crunch time. But I do declare that despite the church's warts, God ordains us through our baptism to share a message not being shared elsewhere, and to model it. God speaks and works this gospel through his church as nowhere else in this world.

Think of it. By God's grace, we are baptized into a new, far-flung, barrier breaking family. This family overcomes our lonely hyper-individualism and gives the gift of authentic community. This family pushes beyond the natural impulse to only help those who can help us, those who are like us, and to seek out with Jesus the lost sheep of Israel. This family regularly gathers at table to remember who we are as family with symbolic elements of Jesus' brokenness, his victory and also ours.

All I can say is welcome Yasiana and Nijah. Like you, we're all adopted. And in that adoption a whole new world and a whole new life opens gloriously before us. Amen.