

"Nobody Gets Quite the Family They Imagined"

Sandy Reimer

Sunday, May 9, 2010

"The great gift of family life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you." ~ Kendall Hailey

Welcome on this beautiful Sunday morning, this Mother's Day. We honor all mothers today: mothers by birth, mothers by adoption, mothers by marriage or partnership, mothers in waiting, grandmothers, and those aunts, and friends and mentors who are there for us when our own mothers cannot be.

SCRIPTURE

From the Book of Genesis, the story of Jacob and his family - Jacob and Esau are twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah and the grandsons of Sarah and Abraham, Israel's patriarch. Esau is born first, with the rights and privileges of the first-born son in those times. As the Jacob and Esau grow up, it is clear that they are different in almost every way. Esau is passionate and temperamental, at home in the wild, on the move with animals, while Jacob is quieter and lives a more settled, pastoral way of life. At one point, Jacob takes advantage of Esau, tricking Esau into giving away his birthright to Jacob, so that Jacob now has the privileges of the eldest son. When Esau realizes how Jacob has tricked him, it sets up a long lasting family conflict. This estrangement becomes complete when Jacob later tricks his father Isaac into giving him a blessing that was meant for Esau. As a result, Esau vows to kill Jacob when their father dies.

Meanwhile, Jacob makes a long journey to his uncle's land, intending to marry his cousin Rachel. He finds Rachel and they fall in love with one another, but Rachel's father will only allow Jacob to marry Rachel if Jacob serves him and works for him for seven years. Jacob agrees. At the end of the seven years, Rachel's father tricks Jacob by sending his older daughter Leah to Jacob's tent on the wedding night. In the morning, Jacob discovers it is Leah, not Rachel, who has slept with him in the tent. When Jacob protests, Rachel's father says that it was his duty to find a husband for his older daughter, Leah, first, but that Jacob can have Rachel as his second wife if Jacob works seven more years for him. And so Jacob works another seven years.

Now the family conflict centers on Leah and Rachel, both wives of Jacob. Leah is able to bear children; Rachel is not; and all manner of jealousy and rivalry ensues. Finally Jacob gathers his family and flees, journeying back to his homeland. On the way, Jacob realizes that he is about to encounter his brother Esau. Jacob sends gifts to Esau, prays to God, struggles with God, and ultimately comes to Esau with humility and, in a surprising twist, is received by Esau with gracious forgiveness.

From the Book of Ruth - Naomi is a widow living in Moab, a foreign land where her family had fled during a time of famine in Judah. Naomi's husband dies and she is left with their two sons. In time, both of Naomi's sons marry Moabite women, Orpah and Ruth. Within the next ten years, both of her sons die. So there is Naomi, left alone without a husband, without her sons. When she hears that there is no longer a famine in Judah, Naomi prepares to return to her homeland. Her daughters-in-law make preparations and set out to go with Naomi, but she pleads with them to go back.

Naomi blesses them, saying "Why would you come with me? Am I going to have any more sons who could become your husbands? No, I am too old. Return home and may God grant that each of you find rest in the home of another husband. " And Naomi kissed them and they all wept aloud.

Yet Ruth would not leave. "Look," says Naomi, "your sister-in-law Orpah is going back to her people. Go back with her." But Ruth replies, "Do not press me to leave you. Where you go, I will go. Where you lodge, I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die and there will I be buried. May the Lord do thus and so to me." And so the two women, Naomi and Ruth set out together and travel until they come to Judah, to the town of Bethlehem, arriving as the harvest begins.

SERMON - There's a lot of truth in the statement that nobody gets quite the family they imagined. Let me tell you about the family I imagined. First, you have to imagine me in the fall of my ninth grade year: tightly-curved red hair with no bangs, which made my slightly chubby cheeks stand out even more, cat's eye's glasses, pale skin that burned easily in the sun (those were the years before sunscreen) and lots of freckles.

I was in the midst of transition from the junior high classes that included all my elementary school friends to the high school classes where my peer group was now all splintered in different directions. I hadn't yet found my place, my circle of friends. I had just been to my first meeting of Luther League, which is what my church high school group was called. It was a Sunday night progressive dinner, and I got to ride with two other freshmen in the back seat of high school senior Bucky Bettis' 1955 Chevy red convertible, a magical, hair-blowing in the wind experience. So I was feeling hopeful that my social life might improve.

I was one of those good students who worked hard and always did my assignments on time, but I daydreamed a lot. That fall I remember those daydreams migrating from my head to my pen as I was supposed to be doing my homework. Suddenly I was making elaborate facsimiles of imagined wedding invitations and birth announcements, creating a whole imaginary pseudo-life, my imagined family. My imaginary husband's name was David; sometimes he was a movie star, sometimes a football hero. Occasionally he was the Prince of some obscure European country, nowhere to be found on any map. Our wedding occurred in October, a beautiful autumn day with falling red and gold leaves, and the sun shining through my glowing hair, which I now wore with bangs. I was beautiful; he was handsome.

We had four children; the first three were spaced three years apart, the last about five years later. Their names were: Susannah Eden (after my favorite characters in my favorite Civil war novel); Michael David; Stephen Phillip; and Christina Lee. Of course we lived happily ever after, the details of which never crossed my mind. That imagined family somehow soothed my loneliness and my awkwardness that fall. By the Christmas snowflake dance, I didn't need my imaginary family any more, so those doodles and daydreams were stuffed away into my diary, where they still are today.

I didn't get that family I imagined – and not only is that a good thing, it's also the truth about families and life and our journeys. Our extended families of origin, all of our in-laws, and even our children and grandchildren come to us from places way beyond what we could have imagined or planned or chosen. I love Kendall Haley's

notion that the great gift of family life is to be intimately acquainted with people you might never even introduce yourself to, had life not done it for you. Think of someone in your family system who comes to mind when you hear that statement, a person you might never even have introduced yourself to, had life not done it for you.

Mother's Day is, of course, a reminder, of the gifts of our families as well as the challenges. I remember all the ways - physically, emotionally, and generationally - I am forever connected to and with my mother, my grandmothers, my mother-in-law, my sons and daughters-in-law, and my grandchildren. On Mother's Day, I also remember that, unlike the families we might imagine, our real families come in all shapes and sizes and configurations. Consider the contrast in our two Biblical stories today. Whenever someone says to you, we need to get back to the family values of the Bible, ask them to read the story of Jacob.

Jacob cheats his brother Esau and deceives their father. Esau then threatens to kill Jacob. Their father is both ineffective and inconsistent. Then Rachel's father strings Jacob along in servitude for fourteen years, lies to him about Rachel and then tricks Jacob by substituting his older daughter Leah in Rachel's place on their wedding night. Talk about dysfunctional family systems; talk about families you would never imagine having. But the surprise, the amazing surprise in this story, is at the end. Jacob travelling back home, discovers he is about to encounter Esau, so Jacob sends gifts to Esau. The night before he meets Esau, Jacob dreams of the famous ladder of angels going up and down from heaven, the story behind the song "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder". The next day Jacob approaches Esau with humility and Esau responds with gracious forgiveness. Grace does happen, and sometimes there is unexpected healing in our families, sometimes even after years of wounding. I invite you to remember a time of healing in your family, perhaps even a healing that was surprising, unexpected.

Naomi and Ruth provide a story of a different kind of family, a family of choice, born of love and respect and difficult times, in which two people find in one another the family they need. When Naomi implores Ruth to return home to her people, Ruth replies, "*Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, will I lodge*" These words are often read or sung at weddings, so usually we don't remember that these words are spoken by a daughter-in-law to a mother-in-law. This beautiful passage is about the power of love and connection in our families of choice, in places where we can be for one another what we are unable to find or have in our biological families. I invite you to think of a woman in your life who is not your mother, but a woman in your life who mothered you at a time when that was important to you.

And I have to ask, did you catch the surprise in the last sentence of Ruth and Naomi's story? The Bible tells us that they set out together and they travel until they come to the land of Judah, to the town of Bethlehem. Like a play that weaves the six degrees of separation into one, Bible stories constantly foreshadow and remember places of birth, of new life and hope.

Our families may not be the families we imagined, but they are the families we have. One of my current favorite TV shows is "Modern Family" which you can find on Wednesday nights at 9pm. It's only a half hour long, but the writing is great, the acting is superb, and the situations are funny enough to be real and real enough to be funny.

There are three families in this show, all interconnected through the older father Jay who has an adult daughter Claire and an adult son Mitch. Jay himself is remarried to Gloria, a younger Hispanic woman from Columbia who has a school-age son. Jay's adult daughter Claire is married to Phil, and they have two teen-aged daughters and an elementary school son. Jay's adult son, Mitch, and his partner, Cam, are a gay couple who have adopted an Asian baby girl, Lily. The interplay among and between these family subsets is amazing and touching as they negotiate how to stay connected and how to be supportive of each other's personalities, relationships, parenting styles and transitions.

In a recent episode, the underlying theme was about family values. I want to show you a clip from that episode in which Mitch and Cam discuss their commitment to their daughter and their values and how they see themselves as a family. Cam explains that it is important to them that one of them be home full-time with Lily in these early years. *"We are a traditional family,"* he says, and the camera pans in on the two of them, next to each other, very earnest and almost deadpan. Mitch responds, *"Yes, that's just what the disabled lesbian shaman said when she blessed Lily's room."* The truth is that they are a traditional family with strong family values, which even the (disabled lesbian) shaman recognizes. And it is wonderful to see that truth brought to life every week on this show, wonderful see the connection between these family members and their acceptance of one another.

I read an article entitled "A Risky Proposal" in the January 18th edition of the New Yorker magazine, about the campaign to petition the Supreme Court to legalize same-sex marriage. In that article, a media consultant, Eugene Hedlund, talks about his work creating new television ads for this campaign. One of those ads is titled "Family Values" and features a retired naval submarine commander named Frank Reifsnnyder. Frank speaks of his gay son who is raising two children with his partner, and Frank talks about the joy this family and these children bring to him. The ad ends with Frank saying, *"This may not be the family I imagined, but it is the family that I have and the family that I love."*

I remember going to see the film, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner" with Sidney Poitier, Katherine Hepburn, and Spencer Tracy in 1967, a film about a Caucasian young woman who brings home her African-American fiancé to meet her parents. It was a radical film at the time. Today it is inconceivable to us to think that a couple of different racial backgrounds couldn't get married. My prayer is that in our lifetime, in our country, we will recognize marriage as a fundamental right for all couples and that those marriages will be welcomed and blessed in every faith community.

What we all really hope for in our families – whether biological, adopted, marital, partnered, chosen friends, found kindred souls – what we all really hope for in our families is to be loved, to share our love, to have a home that is a place of safety and respite, where we are accepted in all our glory and all our flaws, a place where we belong and where we are encouraged to dream and to grow. All the outside images we had or have, all the imagined daydreams of what our family might look like, fade when we find those deep connections, values and love that we long to give and receive. And

we find our family home in many ways with many varieties of family connections and, often, my friends, in this church.

"I saw an old wife stricken,
the man bending painfully above her:

'let me serve, be eyes, limbs.'

Each wearing for better for worse, the other's flesh ...

I see visible things of this world, go down on knee before,
fashion music toward, measure hope and decline upon
the least audible heartbeat of this holy darkness:

I love you,"

~ from "Go Down on Knee" by Daniel Berrigan

On this Mother's Day, may you remember those moments in your life when you knew beyond doubt that you were loved. May you remember those moments in your life when you bent your knee before someone, serving them in love. And may you know that those family values that really matter – patience and kindness, compassion and forgiveness, faithfulness and steadfast love – are also the deepest spiritual values. They are the practices that guide us on the path of the Holy. We love because God first loved us. God is love and whoever lives in love lives in union with God and God lives in union with them.

TIME FOR PRAYER - As we enter our time of prayer, I want to say a word about Julia Ward Howe, the woman who issued the first proclamation of a Mother's Day. She was born in 1819. In addition to founding the Girl Scouts, Julia was active in the movement to abolish slavery and often helped run away slaves. Julia saw not only the death, wounds and disease which killed and maimed the soldiers in the Civil war, but also the backwash of the war as she worked with widows and orphans in both the North and South. She believed that equality and peace were the two most important issues of her time. In 1870, Julie called for a formal recognition of a Mother's Day for Peace, on the second Sunday in May. She wrote: *Arise then women of this day, whether your baptism be of water or of tears, let us commemorate the dead and solemnly take counsel with each other as to the means whereby the great human family can live in peace.*

Mother God, You who create the earth and all its creatures; You who whisper in our hearts from the moment we are born; You who surround us with your unconditional love: We pray for our mothers, seeing the image of their faces like the varied and vivid colors of a kaleidoscope, surrounded by the shining light of your blessing, both here on earth and with you in heaven.

We pray with gratitude for the love and care our mothers gave us, and the care of all the women in our lives, who have nurtured our Spirit, encouraged our growth, and stood with us in the difficult times. We are thankful, beyond words, for these women and for who we are because of them. Bless our families, near and far, in all their quirkiness and in all their best moments.

We remember as well Julia Ward Howe and her commitment to peace. And so we too pray for peace, O God, peace in families, peace in communities and nations, peace on this earth. We dream of the day when we as a human race can see beyond our individual selves and interests, when we can see ourselves as part of the whole, part of one community and one planet, working not for what is now but for what shall be for our children's children.

You are with us, O God, within us and among us. May we seek you in all that has life, may we find you in every living soul, and may your love truly guide our lives and our deeds. Amen.