

## **Connecting With Family**

*Luke 2:1-7, 22-32, Proverbs 3:1-10*

Christmas is *all* about family. Let me tell you why I think so.

First, Christmas is *all* about family because family was meant to be all about love and Christmas is all about love. Now I can imagine you expected me to say something about love so I won't disappoint you!

I am not an expert in family relationships but I do know that love cannot exist by itself, isolated from relationships with others. Me, myself and I is not a relationship in which love will thrive. True love must be expressed to others in words and in actions.

There is an old, old joke about a couple who were having a bit of an argument. The wife said to her husband, "You know what it is that is *really* troubling me?"

"NO, what?" he replied.

"You never tell me that you love me," she responded.

"Well, dear, I told you that the day we were married. If I change my mind, I'll let you know!"

You and I *know* we all need more affirmation than that! And what better place than in a family to affirm one another with our words and actions. And for those who don't have a family, the Scripture says God can put you into a family. King David said in Psalm 68:6, "You [God] find families for those who are lonely." So for those who are alone, ask God for a family. And for those who have families, ask God to increase your family with someone who needs to be with you.

I used to live on the next street over from the first church I served in Regina, Saskatchewan. Every evening I would walk up the back alley toward my home and every day my young son would start running down that alley toward me. Every day I would pick him up in my arms and swing him around and hold him close and give him a big kiss. We laughed with joy every time we hugged each other.

My friends, God has kissed this planet and this universe with love! As Christians, followers of Jesus, we celebrate Christmas primarily because the Word – meaning Jesus Christ -- became flesh and blood and came to live with us as a human being. Jesus did not appear on the scene in frightening or awesome majesty but came inside a human body as a baby boy. And he experienced a human birth and life as a growing child, a youth and an adult on Earth until his early 30s when he also experienced death like us – in his case, an excruciating and humiliating death. The Bible says in the Letter to the Ephesians that, long before God created the Earth, he had humanity – us -- in mind. We were the focus of God's creative love. But knowing what would happen, God also planned to forgive us and set us free from all that would hold us back from experiencing a whole and a holy life. And God's love was expressed in Jesus' death on the cross for our sin.

God has kissed this planet with his passionate love for humanity through Jesus of Nazareth but, today, either we have *forgotten* about the kiss, or we *don't know* about God's kiss, or we *struggle against* God's kiss of love. I believe Christmas gives us another opportunity to connect with the love of God, especially when we open ourselves to God seen in Jesus and to one another with care and compassion.

Second, Christmas is *all* about *real* families too because there is not only love but there is also pain and sorrow in our families as there was pain and sorrow in Jesus' family that first Christmas.

Perhaps you didn't expect me to say that. But I have been around long enough to know there is pain and sorrow in many families – and in my own extended family relationships. Nothing new there. But perhaps we need to acknowledge the real pain that exists in our relationships if there is to be a genuine hope of healing and a genuine hope to experience real love in our lives. Christmas is difficult for many because of the reminders of loved ones who are now missing or of relationships that have been broken. Yesterday I was privileged to conduct the funeral for Al Fowler. Al was in his 100th year and died peacefully in his bed last week. But his loving wife, Dorothy, and his son, daughter, grandchildren and one great-grandchild will always remember Christmas 2009 as the first Christmas without a husband and father and grandfather and great-grandfather.

Because of the sorrow associated in many lives around Christmas, the local ministers and churches in this area (including OYM) get together during the Christmas season in a worship service especially designed for those who mourn at this time of the year. This year it will held Monday, December 21, at St. Matthew's Anglican Church. Some of you, I know, have attended in the past.

We are a blessed people, are we not? I am very thankful for the sense of contentment we often feel. Yet I do tell myself to be careful not to miss something vital. A mother told the following story of how her daughter's concern for the wider community touched her:

One evening, my oldest daughter came home from a ... worship service. She had been deeply affected by the experience and, in response, had written on a piece of paper, "Help me *not* to be OK just because everything is OK with me." [Her mother] was so moved by what she wrote that [she] tacked the piece of paper up ... in the kitchen as a reminder that, in a community, it is always *we*. In a community, if someone else is not OK then, to some degree, I am not OK either.

And that is true whether in our own families or in the church or in the communities we live in. So I am glad the Mission and Community Service Team chose the North York Women's Shelter for our annual White Gift project this year. Perhaps that was providential – choosing a project to help broken families, abused women and their children, to find safety and healing and wholeness as a family again.

Jesus' family – his mother, Mary, and father, Joseph – experienced difficulty and pain in his early years. It would not have been easy for Mary, in the later months of her pregnancy, to travel

the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem by donkey over rough roads. And it must have been a frightening experience to have to leave family and friends in their home country and escape to a foreign country because their baby was being hunted down to be killed. Jesus was kept alive and loved by a family who also knew great danger.

Finally, Christmas is *all* about family because God is really *all* about family.

We read the Scripture this morning from Luke 2. Verse 7 has always intrigued me: “She [Mary] gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger -- there was no room for them to stay in the inn.” Here is why I find this verse intriguing. First, the Greek word translated “inn” in this verse does not mean a hotel or motel in our modern sense of the term -- or in the biblical meaning of the Greek term either. If Luke had wanted us to think it was a hotel-like inn, he would have used the proper word for inn, which he did use in Luke 10 when describing how the Good Samaritan took the half dead man to an “inn” with an “innkeeper.” That word was clearly different from the word here in the story of the birth of Jesus. Second, Luke 2:7 does not indicate there was no “room” available but that there was no available *space*. The Greek word translated “inn” here is used in only one other story in the New Testament. In Luke 22:11, the word describes the “upper room” of a house where Jesus held the Last Supper with his disciples. So the word would be more correctly translated “guest room.” *Today’s New International Version* does just that in Luke 2:7: “[Mary] wrapped [Jesus] in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.” Thus, what Luke actually said was that, at the particular house Joseph and Mary approached, the guest room was already occupied. Mary had no choice but to give birth in the room occupied by the animals on the ground floor. But she still would have been part of the household with the family and their other guests staying upstairs. And she had some privacy as well.

So the different words Luke used – one meaning “guest room” and the other meaning a hotel “inn” – intrigue me when I consider what we are really meant to understand in this birth story about Jesus.

Why do we always think of a barn in the story of Jesus’ birth? Because of the prominence of the “manger” in the story (Luke 2:7, 12, 16). For the early translators and even for many of us today, a “manger” would naturally be located in a barn. Yet, for thousands of years and even in much of the world still today, mangers are found in the same structure where the family lives! It may seem strange to us, but animals are described in the Bible as being kept on the lower level in the house. So it is highly likely that, when Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in a manger, she did so in a house – with the family or families upstairs.

The other note of intrigue for me is this. In that culture, childbirth was an important community event. Therefore, it seems unthinkable the people of Bethlehem would have failed to help pregnant Mary. I suspect, when the time came, the women upstairs came downstairs to assist Mary with Jesus’ birth. So Jesus was born in a house, among family and beside animals that also needed protection -- not in the barn out back of a hotel.

All of this points to one thing: Family is important to God. Mary and Joseph were surrounded by family when God’s Son was born into this world. Jesus was not left out in the cold at his birth.

The Christmas story is about inclusion and a reminder that family is important to God. And family should be important to us too. Family is, in fact, critically essential for our well-being.

Beyond our biological family, there is a spiritual family. Some people do not have biological family close by on Christmas. Some have unhealthy family relationships that strain their celebration. As an adult, Jesus added some important insights about family that help to bridge these relationship gaps. When his own mother and brothers came to speak to him one day, Jesus told the crowd that his mother, brothers and sisters are those who do the will of his Father in heaven (Matthew 12:50). Jesus was not slighting his biological family but taking the opportunity to speak of his purpose on Earth extending beyond them and including the whole of humanity. Jesus' biological family would eventually come to understand this. And old Simeon also understood this when he held the Baby Jesus in his arms in the Temple. He said: "With my own eyes I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples: A light to reveal your will to the Gentiles [the non-Jewish nations] and to bring glory to your people Israel."

My friends, one of the wonderful truths from the first Christmas is that God wants us all to have a family and be connected. Especially during this season, when many feel disconnected and some have suffered loss and feel all alone, the Christmas story reminds us how important both our biological and our spiritual family are. This Christmas, let's be intentional about being connected – or getting reconnected – to family, to each other *and to God*. And let's help others get connected too.

May this be so for me and for you.

Rev. Chris Miller  
Second Sunday in Advent  
December 6, 2009