

#### 6.6.24 Bill Uetracht Genesis 3: 8-15 Pentecost 3

Family matters. It does. Family is a good gift that demands our attention. We need to spend time on the gift. We need to nurture our relationships with our parents and our kids and our siblings. Family matters. Yes, it does.

I start with that assumption. The Bible as it tells its story speaks often of family. You can't read Genesis and not encounter family. Adam and Eve and their two boys. Abraham and Sarah and their kids and grandkids and great-grandkids and great-great grandkids. Jacob and his twelve boys. Family. Family. Family. Much of Biblical story telling revolves around family. Family matters!

And then there are family *matters*. The verb is changed to a noun. Not only does family matter, but there are also family matters that matter. And I suspect that that is really what today's readings are calling us to probe.

Let's start with the family matters of Genesis three. The first man and the first woman, the first family, find themselves hiding from God, the God who in a very human like way decides to take a little walk in the garden. And this God is no dummy. He takes a walk at the time of the evening breeze. This God is not going to get too hot. He knows better than to go for a walk in the middle of the afternoon when the sun is burning bright. It's clear that this walk is in pursuit of the man and woman, the ones he had created.

"Where are you"? God cries out to the man. For some reason, God doesn't know where he and his wife are. This writer didn't need for God to know everything. The man responds with "I, I, I. / heard the sound of you in the garden, and / was afraid, because / was buck naked; and / hid myself." Isn't it funny and true that when people get caught, they often resort to "I" talk? I...I..I...

These I-preoccupied people, the man and the woman, are naked; they are feeling vulnerable. They couldn't handle living life on the basis of trust; they wanted knowledge, so they ate of the tree of the knowledge of

good and evil, which is the only thing that God said that they shouldn't do. And they now have discovered that knowledge isn't all that it's cracked to be. We were naked before. But we didn't care. We were free and easy. And now we have grown up. We are aware of our nakedness. We don't want anybody to see us in all our finery. We're feeling too vulnerable.

God says. "Did you eat from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?"

"Oh, that woman you gave me made me do it." You and she are to blame.

"What do you say to that, Eve?"

"Well, it's the stupid snake. He made me do it."

There are consequences for not living on the basis of trust. Snake, you are going to crawl on your belly your whole life. You are going to eat dust. (In this fanciful story you can see that ancient people weren't so crazy about snakes and wondered why they slithered on the ground and didn't walk on two or four legs.)

"And you snake and you woman, you are not going to get along. What's more, Eve, your kids aren't going to get along with the snake either. You and they are constantly going to battle."

It's time to consider family matters. The message is that there is a fly in the ointment. Life is filled with struggle. There is no getting around it. So, it is no surprise that your family is dysfunctional. And since family is the place that issues around worth and identity are worked out, it is no surprise that many of you and your family member have issues.

And yes, those issues can lead to enmity. Enmity is part of the human predicament. And enmity often looks like blame. Oh, it's always somebody else's fault. It's never my responsibility. No, no, never. They are to blame. To take responsibility—that would be too vulnerable for me. No, I must focus on someone else. It's too hard to face the truth.

If you want to understand the journey with other humans, you need to be honest about the fly in the ointment. Life is a struggle. Humans are

a challenge. Family is messy. This is one of the big family matters that begs for our understanding.

Our gospel reading for today from Mark takes us to other family matters as it deals with Jesus' family. Jesus is growing in popularity, becoming so popular that after he returns to what is probably his own home, with a massive crowd present, he finds it hard to even get a bite to eat. Jesus' family responds to this chaotic scene by trying to take matters into their own hands. They try to restrain Jesus, seize him, for people (they?) are saying that he is crazy. He's challenging too many things, too many folks. What is he thinking? He's going to get himself into trouble; he's going to harm our family's reputation.

In Mark's storytelling, the story about Jesus' family is disrupted with a story about his extended religious family, the scribes from the big town of Jerusalem. This is a typical way for Mark to relay his message. Many people call it a "sandwich" approach. You start a story, then you disrupt the story, and then you go back to finish the first story. You got the meat and cheese in between the two pieces of bread. The two pieces of bread are the story about Jesus' family. The meat and cheese is the story of the scribes who call Jesus names, Beelzebul, the Lord of the flies, the king of dung. The scribes like Jesus' family want to stop Jesus. He's getting to be a real pest.

The bottom piece of bread brings the story of Jesus' family to a conclusion, an unsettling one at that. Jesus' mother and brothers are outside of his house calling to him. And some of the crowd in the house reports to him that they are asking for him. And he says to the crowd, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Looking at those who surround him, he says, "Here are my mother and brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."

Oh my! This guy is getting radical. He's redefining family, something that is somewhat wild for us, but overwhelmingly wild for his audience. For his audience, family was indeed everything. To leave behind the family was often to leave behind the means to economically secure your

own life, to establish your credibility and honor in the community. And wild Jesus says that in his world family isn't about blood. This is a family matter we must grasp, if we are going to be disciples of Jesus. Yes, family matters. But it does not matter ultimately.

How often we think the task of our lives is the creation of the ideal family in which everybody gets along, and everything looks good! How often we punish ourselves for our families that are anything but perfect! How often we put all our eggs in the family basket! Family ends up determining all our choices. It shapes where we spend our time, what we do with our money, and probably most importantly, where our energy for life goes.

Now I am not advocating that you abandon your families. I rather like mine, and I realize that cults often cut people off from their nuclear families. But I do think that Jesus wants us to move beyond seeing family as the end-all and be-all of life. When we follow him, we discover sometimes that the folks most significant in our lives are not simply the people we are related to. They are the ones who seek the ways of God with us. For me, this does not diminish the importance of our immediate families but places them in some kind of perspective. They are gifts, but they are not everything. And honestly, sometimes our making them everything ends up damaging us and the family itself.

I remember a family from the previous church that I served. They were a fascinating study. "Oh, family is everything to us," they would say. Many members of the family lived on the same street. When I would be visiting one of the members of the family, other family members who lived in other houses would be in and out of their house. And they all were crabby with each other. They argued with one another constantly. It was hard to be around this "oh-so-close" family. I wanted to say to them, "You need not be so close. You need some space from one another. You need a life. You need a bigger life."

Family sometimes can cause our lives to collapse in on themselves. Jesus, I am convinced, wants us to have a bigger life. Life in

the kingdom is bigger than just our small, local, immediate family. And while that may be challenging news, it really is good news. The perfect family is not attainable. Your kids are going to grow up and eventually leave you, especially if you and they are healthy. Your parents are going to die. Your siblings—well, they are probably going to think differently than you and have different experiences than you. There's a bigger world out there for you. There are other people, near and far, who can accompany you in this journey with Jesus and toward God. And frankly, these folks can make your lives phenomenally interesting and life-giving.

Yes, family matters. But also, there are many family matters that we must consider. Life in the human and the nuclear family is a struggle. It always has been, and it always will be. Family isn't all that it is cracked up to be. Family is not everything. And family sometimes looks very different in the kingdom of God. Surprise of all surprises, the most important family matter: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother."