

June 16

The Myth of the Perfect Family

Genesis 12:1-9

When I say “Perfect Family” what comes to mind? Historically the perfect family was seen as a working father and a stay-at-home mother. They had two to three children. The mother kept the house clean, had meals on the table at just the right time, volunteered at her children’s school and dressed impeccably with never a hair out of place. The father worked hard but on coming home had plenty of time for his children, was a strict but fair disciplinarian and filled his weekends and vacations with family time. The children were well behaved, rarely getting into trouble, always said, “please” and “thank you”, cleaned their plates and their rooms without being told and did their chores and homework without complaint. The old television show, “Leave it to Beaver” lifted up this almost idyllic view of the family.

Now I am going to ask you a question. What about the family you grew up in? Was it one of these perfect families? If you had a family of your own, what about the family you raised? Was it perfect? And what about the family you are now a part of? How perfect is it? My guess is that none of them were all that perfect. When we are honest about our families, they were, are, more like the one portrayed in “All in the Family” with Archie Bunker!

And a brief aside here. When I talk about family I mean much more than the traditional nuclear family. It is whatever relationship we were in, or are in, that nurture us and gives relationships meaning. It might be, at this time of life, that we are living alone yet we are still involved in family by being grandparents or great-grandparents. It might mean living independently but needing some help from our children. It might be a friendship that brings comfort and pushes away the loneliness. It might be all of the above and more. Life is messy, relationships are messy, families are messy.

Messy families are the norm and yet, when we think of the families portrayed in the Bible, we tend to think of them as Godly, almost perfect families. Over the next few weeks we are going to examine the patriarchs of our faith and the Jewish faith and see how far from perfect they were! As we see how God worked in and through these families, we will see how God can work and still works in our lives.

Today we begin with Abram and Sarai. Over this series we are going to spend a lot of time with them. Their family life was flawed and at times dysfunctional just like our families. They experienced family jealousy, one child demanding more attention, a father who was sometimes clueless about parenting and did not always show his children the love they craved, and more. The story of this family draws us into an understanding of our own place in God's messy family. If God could use someone like Abram and Sarai then we can rejoice that God is at work in our family structures today.

Before we go any further, we need to acknowledge the importance of these first three verses of Genesis 12. All three monotheistic faiths, Judaism, Christianity and Islam hinge on these verses, "the call of Abram." Abram is told to leave his land, family and father's household by God, "for the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and will bless you and all the families of the earth will be blessed because of you." Abram did what God commanded and left, with his household, and traveled to Cana. This story of call and obedience is seen as the beginning of Judaism and Christians later would see in Abraham's faithfulness an example for us as well. In the Koran there are similar passages that highlight the importance of the faith of Abraham as seen in his saying yes to God.

The call story of Abram is about the promises of God and how to find blessings. Like Abram, the promises of God, at times, seem hard to believe. He was told that God was going to make of him a great nation. Yet, Sarai was childless and they were getting up there in age. How did Abram think that this promise would be fulfilled? We don't know his thoughts, we just hear about his willingness to trust.

To get back to our story, he left what he knew and went with his family towards something that was supposed to be better than what he had. He knew life was not perfect but trusted that the future offered blessings. Too often, we expect perfection and, instead, need to re-learn that perfection is a work in progress. We are asked to work together as a family, trusting, believing good things can happen. We all probably should say a prayer of gratitude that God does not require perfection for us to receive blessings.

Here is a question to ponder, “Even though we know we are not perfect or come from perfect families why do we hold others to that standard?” How often I hear the whispers about how so and so’s family is doing this or that. People feel put down because we disapprove of their life choices. The story of Abram is that we are encouraged to believe and walk with God and, in spite of the messiness of life, know that God has blessings in store for us and those we love.

How did Abram show his trust in God? Abram gets up and walks. He doesn’t know where he is headed, what he does know is that God is with him on the journey. Even when he arrives in the land of Canaan and is told this is the place, the blessings seem far off. Abram is a nomad and in his lifetime the only piece of land he will ever own is the burial plot for Sarah. At this time he is still childless. Nothing that God has promised has happened. None of the blessings have been given. Yet, as he journeys through Cana, Abram trusts and believes, and ultimately, we are the recipients of that faith. We are the ones to be blessed just as God promised.

What would it be like to hear today God’s command to go or, a better translation, to walk? It is hard to leave comfortable patterns and routines and go in a new direction believing that there are blessings to be found and that we can be a blessing through our faithfulness. Think about the families they left in Haran. I am sure most of them saw the actions of Abram as foolishness instead of faithfulness. Is there a place God is asking you to go today in faith? Are you being prodded to step out into some new place? It seems that all of us are reminded to move past comfortable surroundings and step out into the unknown. This is how growth occurs. How can we walk forth into new beginnings and also encourage others to walk forth in faith? How can we support their trying to find their own blessing even if it is not something we understand?

The last question I want us to think about today is, “How are all blessed?” Blessing becomes a key theme in the narratives that follow. The word is used eighty-eight times in Genesis. Over and over we are reminded that in spite of all the messiness God is at work and blessings will occur. While blessings are central in Genesis, it is inadequate and incomplete without promise. The promise of God, we use the term

covenant, was how people were to begin to define themselves. They were the children of Abraham. They were the blessed of God.

Yet in Abram's time I am sure it was hard to see the blessings. Sarai remains childless for many more years. Abraham has a concubine who presents him with a boy, Ishmael. Finally, in old age, he and Sarai, now renamed Abraham and Sarah, have Isaac. Then there is the jealousy between the mothers. There are stories of estrangement and ultimately a future. And it all started by Abraham getting up and taking a step into the unknown with God.

How does God's family become a blessing today? When we intentionally strive to remember the promises of God, and walk faithfully following the commands of God, we will be a blessing to those around us. They will find us loving and kind. We will be more tolerant of the mistakes of others, like Ward and June Cleaver in "Leave it to Beaver" instead of yelling at our son-in-law and calling him a meathead as Archie Bunker was want to do. So, no matter how messy the family, there are ways to live into the promises of God, share those promises through our actions with our families, and be a blessing.

Also, where in my daily walk do I pause to say thank you to God? We need to thank God for where we are in life instead of wishing to be somewhere else. Abram struggled with this, at times. He had to be reminded by God that right now God was blessing him. He learned to see the blessings of today, he persisted in believing those unanswered blessings and ultimately trust in God was his reward.

We need to remember God is faithful in the messiness of life. We are not called to perfection but to faithfulness. Let us celebrate our families, no matter how dysfunctional they were or are! And let us strive to walk with God in trust, knowing that in this we will be a blessing to others.