

Faith and Families  
Dr. June Goudey, November 26, 2006

Sometimes, my sermon titles are quite catchy like, *Getting a Handle on Jesus, Called to Hope, or Make Way for Salvation*. Other times, like this morning for instance, when I have to put the bulletin to bed early in the week... before I'm quite ready... I take a fall back position and allow my self some wiggle room. So it was that after presiding over a string of memorial services, preparing for Thanksgiving, the arrival of my Mom, the much anticipated gathering of the Feaver clan, and yesterday's wedding of a friend's daughter, I foolishly titled today's sermon, *Faith and Families*.

Too much wiggle room can be a dangerous thing. As I attempted to drift off to sleep last night, Ann gently reminded me that our family would be attending today's service. Needless to say her last words, "No pressure, June! delayed my ability to drift away !

Now the hour of reckoning has arrived. The family rituals of Thanksgiving Day have once again given way to the season of giving. Christmas lights dot our evening landscapes. And pre-dawn readiness for bargain prices on *Black Friday* has once again drawn out the best of the human spirit; particularly in the land of Target in Alexandria VA where two men punched each other in the face. According to news reports, the two men continued to face each other in a sparring stance while bouncing into Target, before going their separate ways and disappearing among the crowd of shoppers. About 15 seconds later two women exchanged blows with a third woman, before they too separated to do their shopping. Why is it that the season of giving always begins with getting?

If I had any doubts about the pressures that accompany this time of year, I was quickly reminded by a NY Times article entitled, "Pass the drumstick and an olive branch," The author reminded her readers that Thanksgiving reunions occasion more than a great meal. "Family grudges buried by time and distance resurface. New girlfriends meet ex-husbands. Prius drivers make small talk with S.U.V. owners. And vegans spend the meal defending themselves."

"There are a lot of impossible, unspoken rules on Thanksgiving," noted an author and family therapist who practices in the San Francisco Bay Area. "We're supposed to be thankful and eat a lot and drink a lot and be nice to each other. Teenagers are supposed to stop being sullen. Matriarchs are supposed to make a perfect turkey and some man is supposed to know how to carve it."

At the heart of these unspoken rules lies the seemingly impossible notion that if you get people together who spend the rest of the year avoiding one another, the clouds of life will part, a rainbow will appear, and everyone will make nice. If only family life were as simple as Erma Bombeck describes it

“The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.”

James Dobson’s Focus on the Family believes that family comes in one size: Mommy and Daddy and their heterosexual children. We know otherwise because we have seen and felt the consequences of narrowly defining family units according to a strict set of rules. As Margaret Mead observed, “Nobody has ever before asked the nuclear family to live all by itself in a box the way we do. With no relatives, no support, we've put it in an impossible situation.”

Her observation is so true! When it comes to faith and family we need to remember that the Holy family of Mary, Joseph, and little baby Jesus presently popping up in our neighborhood crèches bears little resemblance to reality. Consider Jesus’ response when, according to Mark’s Gospel he is told his family wishes to speak to him.

Then Jesus' mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you."

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" he asked.

Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus expands the notion of family in two simple sentences...Here are my mother and brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother. It’s easy to forget the context of Jesus’ observation but let me remind you what Mark tells us just ten verses earlier. Jesus is becoming so well known for his healing powers and his authoritative teaching that crowds are following him everywhere. He has also appointed twelve disciples to help spread his message.

His family however is not on board with Jesus’ true calling. Mark records Jesus went home, and again a crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, "He is out of his mind."

Sometimes those who are closest to us... those who share our diseases and toothpaste, covet one another's desserts, hide the shampoo, or borrow our money think they know us best, but in truth they may not know us at all. You want to go into the ministry? Are you out of your mind? You want to leave your Mormon husband, Are you out of your mind? ...you want to be a writer... Are you out of your mind? I’m sure many of you could keep this going for quite a while...how about a show of hands...yep!

If you hear in Jesus' words, permission to walk away from your family of origin because they don't understand you or have hurt you in some way, I think you miss the point.

Jesus' is reminding us that the true nature of family resides in our divine interconnectedness --- at the heart of life we are one with those who do God's will. The tricky part is being clear about the meaning of God's will.

God's will is not about obedience it's about flourishing... another way of understanding the kingdom of God is to remove the g and speak of the kin dom of God...the interrelatedness of life itself. Native Americans enter a sweat lodge repeating a prayer to "all my relations," as poet Joy Harjo reminds us ... *remember that you are all people and that all people are you, remember that you are this universe and that this universe is you, remember that all is in motion is growing, is you.*

I know very well how easily families of origin break. My Dad had three children before he divorced and married my Mom. My real father left my life at the age of 4. Many of you have known similar disruptions in your life and the pain that goes with them. When my brother and I were growing up, people talked about us as coming from a "broken home." That hurt for a long time, until I learned that God was the true source of my relations. I knew then that I could make my own family, I could break all the rules; and when I did... I discovered that even though love breaks it also heals

How many of you remember the Mary Tyler Moore Show? One of the most oft-repeated lines of that show is heard when Mary describes her feelings about her co-workers. *"Well I just wanted to let you know that sometimes I get concerned about being a career woman. I get to thinking that my job is too important to me. And I tell myself that the people I work with are just the people I work with. But last night I thought what is family anyway? It's the people who make you feel less alone and really loved."*

That's right. Family has to do with the people who make you feel less alone and really loved. When you think about the nature of love, remember that true love has to do with well-being: Yours and the people who love you. Ethicist Beverly Harrison defines love *as the power to act one another into well-being.* Well-being is intimately tied to the presence of grace at work in our lives. We receive well-being as participatory grace; that is we must care enough about ourselves and one another to join the Spirit in this deeply communal work of making love true.

Our families of origin shape us in numerous ways... they are the first word; but they are **never** the final word... When we understand the power of love to occasion well-being, we learn how to create the families we need! Today, I thank God for my family... those on the East Coast... and those who gathered around me this morning... the very ones who darn near drove me crazy as I tried to write this sermon. As the TV blared and the toaster dinged and the game *Catch Phrase* counted down with louder and faster sounding bleeps, I had my doubts about what would come out of my mouth this morning. [Smiling!] ...The simple truth is, though, that with these loving folks around me my life is so steeped in well-being that the grace I need to flourish goes on and on and on. Amen.