

‘This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. **Family Values**

Last week someone told me a story about being in church with her children when they were still young. She remembers it was all she could do to keep them in line during the church service. After that service a well-meaning person came up and exclaimed how well-behaved her children were. She just stared and said “thank you.” What she was really thinking wouldn’t have been appropriate to say in church.

I can relate to that story. I remember hearing “your child is so well-behaved” and thinking, why can’t I experience that when he’s around me? I suspect many parents have that feeling. Children often drive their parents wild, just as parents can drive children wild. That’s been true as long as humans have been around.

We heard a hint of that in this morning’s first reading. You may have caught the irony. Last week God told the boy Samuel to tell the priest Eli that God was fed up because Eli did nothing to rein in his sons. This week, Samuel is all grown up and has a family of his own. The first thing we hear is that *his* sons have fallen so far from the tree that the people don’t want to have anything to do with them. That’s why they ask for a king instead.

That annoyed Samuel. God was even more annoyed. “They haven’t rejected you,” God told Samuel. “They’ve rejected me. This is what they’ve been doing ever since I led them out of Egypt.” One wonders why God kept trying. Eventually, God did allow them to have a king, but he made sure Samuel told them how bad it would be. It’s a long list. The king will take your sons, your daughters, and the best of your property, Samuel says. You’ll end up no better than slaves. This all came true during the reign of King Solomon many years later. His fabulous wealth arose on the backs of the people he ruled. The people around Samuel wanted to be like everyone else, however, so they ignored his advice and pressed on. The story will go on to describe how Saul was chosen to be the first king. That quickly turned sour. By next week we’ll hear Samuel seek out David to make *him* king.

Families don’t come out too well in today’s Gospel reading, either. Stories about eldest son Jesus have filtered back home and alarmed his family. Mary, his mother, set out with his brothers to restrain Jesus because he “has gone out of his mind.” It’s a curious phrase to use. The Greek word means to lose one’s senses, even to lose track of what’s real and what isn’t. Given how radically Jesus preached and lived, it’s not surprising that his family felt the need to take him in hand.

Meanwhile Jesus got into another argument with the Jerusalem elite over the source of his power. They claimed he was possessed by an unclean spirit sent by Beelzebul, another name for Satan. Jesus argued that that made no sense. What kingdom or house can stand if it is divided against itself? (That makes me wonder how many preachers today will apply that to our nation. I prefer to go in a different direction.) In the first chapter of this Gospel, John the Baptist referred

to the one coming after him as the “stronger one.” Here the stronger one reappears as the one who is able to tie up the “strong man” and plunder his house. In other words, Jesus is far from being out of his mind. Instead, he is able to bind Satan. That’s good news for all of us.

At last Jesus’ family arrived on the scene and tried to see him. When the crowd passed on their request, Jesus quickly snubbed them. “Who is my family?” he asked. Looking around, he replied “All of you sitting here! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” I wonder what Mary pondered in her heart that day.

It’s readings like the ones we have today that make me wary of people who talk about the Bible’s “family values.” We heard today of sons going astray and not coming back. We have Jesus spurning his blood relatives. Later this summer we’ll hear how great King David idly looked his window and saw Bathsheba bathing, and then sent her husband to die in battle so he could marry her. And then there are all the stories about Jacob, who cheated and was cheated by numerous family members. I have a feeling that’s not what people think of when they talk about “family values.”

That’s because the Bible has God values, not family values. God always come first, always. There is no other option. And we continually recoil against that. We don’t like it when God tells Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. We don’t like it when Jesus snubs his mother and the rest of his family. But the reality is that God always has to be first, because if God isn’t first, nothing else works. The early church knew that. That’s why the Gospels talk about father against son and mother-in-law against daughter-in-law and the rest. In the early church, family members betrayed one another into the hands of nonbelieving authorities. I continue to thank God that we do not have that situation in our country, but I also recognize that faith thrives best where being a confessing Christian is a life-or-death decision.

We are always tempted to put something other than God first in our lives. We want to be like everyone else. Today that doesn’t mean wanting a king – although that’s another place where some stray into politics – but for all of us it means being a good consumer, among other things. Some of the most successful companies right now, like Apple and Google, are based on creating the desire to buy something we didn’t need until the company convinced us we did. Our idols look different than they did in Bible days, but they are idols just the same. We still put God values second and other values first.

Human nature doesn’t change much, which is why we can read a book that’s thousands of years old and still find it worthwhile. Children grow up. When they are older, they may have their own kids. Then they have the opportunity, if one may call it that, to have the same kinds of experiences their parents had. It’s been that way for generations. Human nature hasn’t changed, but then, neither has God’s. Fortunately, God’s nature is love. Yes, he gets annoyed, but Jesus showed us that God’s love is far greater than God’s wrath. Even so, God must still always and ever be first. Without that, nothing works. That is what renews our inner nature day by day. That is what prepares us for an eternal weight of glory.

So choose this day to make God first. Make God first, and you’ll look around and see your sisters and brothers and mothers and fathers. It will fill you with joy. It will give you the peace

that passes all understanding. Then go forth into the world and share that love, that joy, that peace.

[Pentecost 3: 1 Samuel 8:4-20; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35.]