

Families 2 – Learning from the Old Testament St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill Sunday 4th October 2020

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Readings: Psalm 127, Genesis 4:1-17, Deuteronomy 6:1-7, Ruth 1:15-22

We said last week that there would be a few surprises in learning about families from the Scriptures and today we start with one: there is no exact, direct, Old Testament parallel with our modern word “family”. The Hebrew *bet ab* is about as close as we might get and the term refers to the “house of the father”. Or possibly we could use the Hebrew term for the household: *mispaha* or *mishpacha* but that is very broad of familial and relational ties. So, what are we talking about when we talk of family from a Christian viewpoint? The answer is quite complex. This week we will look at the implications for family from the Old Testament and next week we will see how family looks from a New Testament perspective and bring it all together.

We begin, textually, in the book of Genesis with our first “family”, Adam and Eve. We have observed before that God created humanity by dividing one entity, Adam, into two very different gendered entities Adam and Eve, who, together, create the one entity humanity. The propagation of the species could only happen by their coming together and through the careful raising of off-spring, of one great family. There are multiple ways God could have achieved the same ends, just as there are multiple ways of propagation in the natural world, yet God chose an intimate and very personal way of humanity achieving this. Central to family would be extended periods of love and care. The essential concept of care within the family then extended, not just to the couple, but to children, siblings and the following generations.

Adam and Eve were told to be fruitful and multiply, to fill the earth and subdue it (Genesis 1:28), to bring it to order. This was the work of their entire family, of humanity. This, ideally, required a harmony and unity of purpose. However, in Genesis 4, when Cain killed his brother Abel, God went right to the heart of the matter asking Cain where his brother was. Cain's response showed how far he had walked from God's intent when he replied, “*I don't know ... am I my brother's keeper?*” The answer is actually, “yes”. We are to have an abiding care and love for our family at the core of our ontology, of who we are, so we can live and work together to fulfil God's purposes. Adam and Eve went on to have other many other children and they had children and they had children. The family was not perceived as a nuclear, as in the modern sense, but rather more of a tribal family where the head “Adam” was the focal point. When Cain broke off and left and created his own family in another land he was seen to have broken from the family, from his father, abandoned the work God had given and became an outcast by his own actions. Cain becomes estranged from the land and a “wanderer”, a person without purpose or direction.

A small side note: for those of you who wondered from where Cain got his wife the answer is clear in history and the Scriptures. This is often a weak accusation against the validity of the Scriptures. According to Josephus Jewish tradition had it that Adam and Eve had thirty-three sons and twenty-three daughters. Adam lived to 930 years (Genesis 5:5), 800 after Seth was conceived (Genesis 5:4). Genesis 3:20 tells us that “**Adam called his wife's name Eve, because she was the mother of all living.**” In other words, all people would henceforth be descended from Eve. Genesis 4:17 tells us that Cain knew his wife and conceived. The Hebrew word translated wife is *ishshah*, which literally means ‘*female from man*’. The theories about aliens, angels or other created races of humans are bunk. Cain married a sister or relative.

Back to the point. Cain's sins were greed, selfishness and pride. These lead to Cain murdering his brother and the breakup and distancing of the family which in turn would have long term repercussions, including ongoing murders. The reality is that a large number of the stories about families in the Old Testament reflect dysfunctional families because of the common human sins that individuals allow to dominate their lives and that do real damage to families. Frequently, the root sins of damage in families come back to greed, selfishness and pride. Sadly, this continues to be true today. Fortunately, because the Scriptures deal with real life, real situations and real people, we are given ample guidance as to how to develop great

families and how to deal with the fallout when it doesn't always work out as we might want. When we allow greed, selfishness and pride to dominate our lives few of our relationships will work out ... especially ones as close and intense as the family. We also walk in the light of the knowledge that yes, we are metaphorically, our brother's keeper, and yes, we do have a duty of care for our families for which God will hold us accountable.

When a large portion of humanity had followed down Cain's road of destruction it was necessary for God to call Abraham to establish a distinct family that will be called God's own to show the world how the family of God should be. The spiritual dispersion of humanity that followed the literal dispersion of Babel would be reversed by Abraham's descendants becoming a world-wide family attracting other nations back to the Father. The family was at the core of welcoming foreigners and teaching God's ways. As we can see from the sixth of the Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5:16, and the only one with a promise, **"Honour your father and your mother, as the Lord your God has commanded you, that your days may be long, and that it may be well with you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you."**, good family relations are a critical key to a long and happy life. In Deuteronomy 6 we see something of this plan. Parents are at the heart of God's design as they raise their children, role modelling love and compassion, for each other, for the wider family and for their children, teaching and disciplining in the ways of God. This blesses the family, the wider community and the nation.

In Deuteronomy 6 we have a very clear and explicit instruction as to some vital parent's duties. The words of God, the promises of God are summarised what is known as the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4-9. Shema means to hear. Classically, **"Hear O Israel"**, the first phrase of this passage. The first two verses read, **"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength."** Parents are to demonstrate this with their own lives and teach the faith to their children. In essence this is the heart of words to Israel and eventually the Law which comes with Moses.

Another important side note here: the framework for relationships between men and women were based on equality unlike so many other parts of the world. Adam and Eve were equals at Creation. They were made unequal by sin and its consequence but as sin was addressed they stood as equals but different functions before God. There was, for example a clear patriarchal emphasis in the line of families for practical reasons. We might note how equally practically Jewish leaders addressed this in the Dark and Middle Ages where it became necessary to trace lineage through the mother's line as so many Jewish woman were raped and abused. The equality of the genders is hinted at in the Song of Songs and in Proverbs 2:17 where the term 'partner' is of an equal. It will take on even more profound meaning in the New Testament period but that's next week.

Children are to honour their parents. This creates a cross-generational love and unity that is both a role model and an encouragement. Did you hear the story of the old man who was left in chair in the corner of the lounge day and night with food thrust at him in a wooden bowl and left to dribble it in if he could. It went on for some time until a young teenager in the family started carving a wooden bowl. His dad asked him if it was a new one for granddad. The son replied in all innocence, *"No, I'm getting ready, making one for you and mum because you've shown me how I have to treat you when you get older."* Funnily enough, that night, the granddad was at the dinner table with the family and had a new chair in the lounge. God wants us to love our families across generations and this is a lovely, wonderful thing to behold in action. I'd have to say it is one of the greatest joys of my life. It wasn't quite the case growing up for me but with Lorraine, as our family has followed God's Way, it is a living truth for us. When we work at living and loving God's Way He blesses us. We might also note that this system did not create dominance over but rather encouraged independence of thought and action within God's framework of love and care. Children were to leave their father and mother, to no longer be controlled by them, to be married and become a new unity. Yet the obligations

of love and care as family remained. In some families, even today, some parents have a lot of trouble letting their children go and not trying to remotely run their lives even when the children have been married. This control, this lack of separation can be, at times, very damaging.

In Leviticus we have many of the Laws of Moses by which the nation was to live. In Leviticus 25:47-49 we have an example of the extent of legal provision in family relationships. In any system there are people who fall on hard times. In those times a person who got into debt or serious financial trouble could either sell themselves, or be sold by a court, into slavery for a given period. The Law allowed a relative the legal right to be able to redeem, or buy, a relative out of this condition of slavery. The care of the family was never intended to be simply to the small, immediate family but wider to relatives and cousins. The wider family was to be protected from impoverishment and slavery, from destitution and undue hardship.

God's image then of the family as nuclear, extended, even regional and national, willing to encompass the stranger and foreigner, had at its core, faith, equality, solidarity and a liberty of conscience and action that would be the backbone of the family, people, nation and ultimately the world. Sadly, throughout the Old Testament we see a progression of families where one or two will be faithful to God yet their families in the longer term turn away and see the consequences. Sometimes quickly as in the priest Eli and his sons, at other times more slowly as in David's son Solomon and his descendants. Yet we also see some wonderful encouraging stories of blessing that encompass so many of the aspects of family. We will finish today with one of those accounts ... that of Ruth and Naomi.

According to the Talmud, the prophet Samuel wrote the Book of Ruth to record a loving story that occurred around 1160BC, some 1100 years before the birth of Jesus. It is worth noting from the outset that Ruth will become the great grandmother of King David, one of the greatest kings of Israel. At the time, Israel's apostasy, its rebellion of against God, and its' sickening immorality and prostitution, physical and spiritual, at every level of society, was being punished in the most severe of ways by God and many people fled the country. The Jewish man Elimelech, his wife Naomi and their two sons had been driven out of their hometown of Bethlehem by warfare and famine. Naomi and her family went to the neighbouring country of Moab where the sons married Moabite women and they struggled on for ten years. But like Job, Naomi's road was not an easy one. She lost her husband and her sons, then her home and livelihood. She was poverty struck and widowed. In her grief and pain, she cried out to God. All she had left were her daughters-in-law she could not support. She failed to see the gift God had given her. In determining to return to the place of her birth she told her daughters-in-law to return to their families (Ruth 1:11 & 15). Orpah did but her second daughter-in-law Naomi refused. Ruth makes one of the most moving statements in the Scriptures saying, **"Wherever you go, I will go; and wherever you lodge, I will lodge; Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God. Where you die, I will die, and there will I be buried. The Lord do so to me, and more also, if anything but death parts you and me."** What is so profound here is that Ruth, a Moabite woman, has fully become part of the family in the truest sense. Not just in her loyalty to her mother-in-law but in her loyalty to Naomi's family and to God. This is exactly what God intended even in Naomi has somewhat lost the plot. Families of love and care, of mutual support and encouragement, even in the worst of times. As the story unfolds, and there's some homework for you to read it, we see God's love and grace at work. Ruth truly becomes part of the Chosen People. Even more as the great-grandmother of King David she becomes part of the family line into which Jesus, the Messiah, would be born (Matthew 1:1, 5). When God includes us in His family we are fully included. And as you will see in the Book of Ruth, God's provision is more loving and unexpected than one might hope for.

So, to conclude this week: the family is multi-dimensional. God has the family at the heart of the community, the nation, the world. The family is to be characterised by faith, learning, honour, love and care and its development is the responsibility of us all. God blesses our faithfulness. To be continued next week. Amen