All in the Family

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One evening, during a violent thunderstorm, a mother was tucking her young son into bed. She was about to turn off the light when her son asked, “Mommy, will you sleep with me tonight?” His mother gave her son a reassuring hug. “I can’t, honey,” she said to her son, “I have to sleep with your father.” After a long silence, she heard her son mutter under his breath, “The big sissy.”

Father’s Day engenders so many emotions. Some of us enjoy a close relationship with our fathers. Some of us don’t. Some of us are well-connected with our dads. Some of us are estranged from our dads. Some of us come from loving homes, while others of us come from broken ones.

We’re preaching this summer on Jesus’ teaching in Luke’s gospel. It’s appropriate on Father’s Day to ask what Jesus teaches about the institution of family. This is where it gets a little dicey. Jesus puts forward some unsettling, confusing words about the role of family.

Take the only story that survives Jesus’ childhood as a 12-year-old. Jesus and his parents travel to Jerusalem to observe the Jewish Passover. On their return trip home, as Jesus’ family travels caravan style, Mary and Joseph come to the horrible realization that Jesus has been left behind. They retrace their steps to find Jesus right where they left him, in the temple sitting at the feet of rabbis. When they say they have been worried sick for his safety, Jesus’ response seems oddly precocious, “Didn’t you know that I had to be about my father’s business?” (Luke 2:49).

When Jesus begins his public ministry, he invites a man to follow him. The man expresses interest but asks for special dispensation to bury his father. “Let the dead bury their dead. Come, follow me.” (Luke 9:60). Harsh, I’d say!

While Jesus is speaking to a large crowd one day, a woman blurts out, “Blessed is the mother who gave you birth.” Jesus puts her in her place: “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and obey it” (Luke 11:28).

I don’t suppose any preacher will speak on this Father’s Day text, “If anyone does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brother and sisters, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). Maybe Jesus
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didn’t get the memo about honoring your father and mother. This sermon may not be what you had in mind for a Father’s Day message. You were expecting something far more family friendly.

In our morning lesson, the house in which Jesus is speaking is overrun with curiosity seekers and people seeking miracle cures. Jesus’ popularity has been surging lately. His preaching tour of Palestine has attracted record crowds. Jesus has become something of a rock star. His mother and brothers can’t push through the throng. Word circulates through the crowd, “Hey, Jesus’ family is standing outside. Pass it on,” until the people sitting nearest Jesus tell him that his family is waiting to talk to him.

According to the parallel account in Mark’s gospel, Jesus asks, “Who is my mother and my brothers?” (3:33). Doesn’t this strike you as a rather odd question? Could Jesus be having a bad day?

Wait, there’s more! Jesus says, “My mother and brothers are the ones who hear God’s Word and put it into practice” (Luke 8:21).

Luke doesn’t record Jesus’ family’s response when his words filter back through the crowd. Jesus said his mother and brothers are those who do God’s Word and put it into practice. He said what?

Jesus honors his mother. Even when he’s hanging on the cross, he provides for his mother’s welfare. His brothers become among his closest followers.

Jesus isn’t denigrating family, he’s inquiring about what’s of ultimate importance. What is your most important allegiance? Is it to God or family?

Honoring family was a sacred duty in Jewish society. But family for Jesus isn’t ultimate. It may be penultimate, but it’s not ultimate. For Jesus, loving and serving God takes precedence over everything, family included.

Eugene Peterson translates verse 21, “My mother and brothers are the ones who hear and do God’s Word. Obedience is thicker than blood.”

There’s a saying that “Blood is thicker than water.” Obedience is thicker still. Hearing and doing God’s Word take precedence over everything.

Some of you are all about family. I mean, it’s over the top. Family comes first in everything.

Is it possible for family to assume too much importance? Evidently Jesus thinks so. An idol is anything that becomes more important to us than God. We not only make idols out of bad things. Even good things like family can assume idolatrous proportions.

I spoke at two Baccalaureate services at local high schools this past week. I spoke on a theme that I address frequently in this church. There are three
Jesus wants followers who walk the talk.

things that ultimately matter. They have nothing to do with what you drive or where you live. They transcend any level of status or success you have achieved in this life. The three things that matter are faith, family and friends. The order of these words is important. Some people invest all their energy on family and friends. Why is it that faith always seems to draw the short straw?

“My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s Word and put it into practice.” Circle the words “hear” and “put into practice.” Hear and do are frequent themes in Jesus’ ministry. In the parable preceding our Scripture lesson, Jesus likens four categories of soil to four types of people. Some people’s hearts are as hard as Virginia clay. Some people lack depth of soil. Some people allow the concerns of this world to choke the seed. Yet, some allow the seed of God’s Word to penetrate the soil and take root. Jesus closes the parable by commending those who hear the word and do what it says (8:15). James writes in his epistle, “Don’t just hear the Word…Do what it says” (1:22).

Each Sunday, we gather for worship to hear God’s Word. We don’t come to hear preachers speak on their favorite subject or ride their pet hobbies, we come to hear God’s Word. I’m not at liberty to make stuff up or tell you what you want to hear. Our job is to preach the Word and your job is to hear the Word. Your job, like the Bereans in the book of Acts, is to receive the Word with eagerness and to search the Scripture daily to see if what Paul says is true (Acts 17:11).

Some Christians talk a good game, but they don’t walk the talk. Their talk is disconnected from their walk. Jesus wants followers who walk the talk.

We talk plenty from this pulpit about establishing a regular, if not daily, Bible reading plan. God can use this book to change your life. I can attest to its life-changing capacity. About 15 years ago, I was losing my enthusiasm for ministry. My soul was bottoming out. My spirit was becoming lethargic to things of faith. I found myself increasingly going through the motions of ministry. So, I made a conscious choice to center each day in prayer and the reading of the Word. I know of no other discipline God has used more to rekindle my love of God than reading and meditating on Scripture. Sure, some days the words seem to lay flat on the page, lifeless and seemingly irrelevant to my life. Yet, I’m struck by the number of times the words of this book sync with real life issues taking place in my life. If it is possible for a book to talk to you, this book qualifies.

Technology consumes us. I was in a room with 15 people this week and every single per-
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son had his eyes glued to his cell phones. The attention we devote to social media and the internet boggles the mind. All this attention given to technology may be killing us softly.

The New York Times ran an article two years ago about a small town in Missouri called Mountain Grove. People used to congregate at a local diner in town called Dee’s Place, which was the center for community life. But lately, this town of 5000 has shifted from sharing the latest news over eggs and coffee to a social media site called Topix, where residents can read and write negative posts about each other, cloaked in anonymity.

A waitress at Dee’s Place said the site has provoked fights and caused divorces. The diner’s owner called it a “cesspool of character assassination.” The article concludes with these words, “The same Website created for candid talk about local news and politics are also hubs of unsubstantiated gossip, stirring widespread resentment in communities where ties run deep…and anonymity is something of a novel concept.”

Why not use this technology to stimulate your growth in faith? We make our devotional available to you both in print and on-line. If you go to our website today and look for the words “Just Live it,” we’ll supply all the information you need to know about our daily devotional. There is a free Bible app called YouVersion that provides access to Bible translations on your phone. There is a website called Crosswalk.com that introduces you to various Bible reading plans.

I know you’re busy, incredibly busy. We’re all busy! But whom are we kidding? We always make time for the things most important to us.

Let me speak for a moment to dads. You want to inspire your kids to have faith or you wouldn’t be here. The best way you can instill faith in your children is to attend to your own spiritual life. If you want your kids to have faith, practice it yourself. If you are haphazard and casual about faith, you can expect your kids to follow suit. Actions will do the talking for you. It’s called walk the talk.

What is our first allegiance? “My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s Word and put it into practice.” Hear the Word and do what it says. Hear and do. Walk the talk.