

Welcome

I'll never forget the day a friend of mine told me she didn't think she could come to church anymore. I was on staff at the church, and this woman was a friend - she volunteered in the ministry I led. She was a single mom, raising her son basically by herself. She pulled me aside one Sunday after worship and said, "JR., I'm not sure I can keep coming here."

Of course, I said, "Oh no. Tell me what's wrong!"

She said, "When the senior pastor talks about families in his sermons, I know he's not talking about me and my son."

My heart broke in that moment - in part because I knew she was right. That church didn't make a lot of space for families that didn't look like *Leave it to Beaver*. Dad, mom, 2.5 kids. Dog optional.

My friend's family didn't look like that, and she felt it.

As a kid raised by a single mom, I felt it too. I was also single at the time - still a few years away from marrying. So I felt it personally.

That church was a really good space for the typical nuclear family. But we didn't do so well with creating spaces for anything else. Isn't that strange?

After all, Jesus was single. So was Paul, who wrote more than a quarter of the New Testament. And yet it's pretty common these days for people whose families don't look like the so-called 'traditional' family to feel as though the church isn't really a space for them.

I don't think I have to tell you that's wrong, do I? Today, I want to look at how we understand family. Because the early church understood the Church to be a family, one based not on biology but faith.

What does it mean for us to treat our faith family as our first family? What does it mean for our biological families as well?

Message

Today is the first Sunday of Lent. Lent is probably my favorite season in the Church year because it's a season of transformation. In Epiphany, we asked who God is and saw that God is the one who lives in solidarity with us, calling and equipping us to be God's images in the world.

Lent is the chance for us to prepare for that calling. It's a way for us to take time together to look inside ourselves and do some careful introspection, to ask as a community where we are not prepared to embark on God's call together.

This year, our series is called "God is Not..." This is a technique to know God that originated with the theologian Thomas Aquinas. In his masterwork *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas wrote,

"We cannot know what God is, only what [God] is not. We must therefore consider the ways in which God does not exist rather than the ways in which [God] does." — Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*

That sounds strange, I know, but it's Aquinas' attempt to take seriously the command not to create idols of God. God is infinite and beyond our comprehension - what theologians like Aquinas call a mystery. But we constantly create pictures of God - pictures that are false. Pictures that do more harm than good.

Like Michelangelo carving the David, we're carving away the things God is not as a way to see more clearly the divine mystery that is God. As we see what God is not, we are more clearly able to confess our participation in those things and turn from them.

We began by confessing that God is beyond us - unknowable except where God chooses to be known. We faced our own propensity to play God. Tim challenged us to refuse the god of money. And last week, Sonya invited us into a deep understanding of how God engages our past.

Today, we're going to face perhaps our most challenging idol yet: that of the family. 'Family' is one of our core American values - since it's an election year, think about how many mailers you're getting about candidates. Nearly every mailer has at least one picture of the candidate, their partner and their kids. Why? Because they want you to know they're a 'family' candidate.

What do we mean by 'family'? In America, it's the 'nuclear' family, what we'll often call the 'immediate' family. A mom, dad and two (point five!) kids. Maybe a dog.

Why is *this* what we mean by family (especially when so few of our families actually look like this?)

There's a lot of sociological history we don't have time to get into, but it's in the name *nuclear family*. Around the 1950s, as the world was entering the atomic age, American culture shifted - with interstate highways and the rise of single-family housing in the suburbs. The mom/dad/kids came to be seen as the nucleus of the atom (which at the time was thought to be comprised of the smallest, indivisible particles).

The thinking was that, in the same way protons, neutrons and electrons are the building blocks of matter, the nuclear family was the most basic, essential building block of society.

Thanks to the rise of television, the vision of the nuclear family - like Ward and June Cleaver, Wally and the Beaver - soon became the gold standard. The Cleavers were aspirational, the All-American family everyone should want to be.

It's no accident they were white and middle class, with a father who worked outside the home and a mother who kept the house.

Churches were quick to embrace this vision of family, soon calling the nuclear family 'God's ideal' and 'biblical'. I sat in a meeting in a church where I worked and heard the lead pastor say that family was more important than church because God had created the family before God created the church.

Friends, that's practically the definition of idolatry!

Now, I don't have to tell you that family is complicated. Sometimes, families are a source of love, support and joy. Those of you who have such families probably know what a blessing you have.

A lot of us have families that are more complicated. I come from a blended family - my parents divorced when I was a teen, and I have parents, step-parents, step-step grandparents siblings and step-siblings and more. Many of us live in homes with grandparents, aunties, tias y tios, cousins and more.

The vast majority of us don't have families that look like the Cleavers, and that's good news because that was never the biblical ideal in any case.

Turn with us to [Genesis 31](#).

This is during the story of Jacob, specifically when he flees from his father-in-law. Jacob's family is super dysfunctional - he's a twin, and his parents played favorites (Jacob was the mamma's boy). Because he stole from his brother, his mom sent him away, to live with her brother Laban.

Laban had two daughters, and Jacob loved the younger. Since he couldn't afford a dowry, he agreed to work for his uncle for seven years, and at the end of that time, his uncle tricked him into marrying his elder daughter.

So Jacob worked seven *more* years and then married the younger sister too. During that time, among his wives and their slaves, he fathered eleven children. (I said 'dysfunctional', right?)

Having Jacob as his employee worked out well for Laban because Jacob is actually a really good herdsman and under his management, Laban's flocks multiplied. Laban became fabulously wealthy. After his eleventh son is born (Joseph - remember him from a couple of months ago?), Jacob decides it's time to strike out on his own, so he packs up his family, his slaves, his flocks and everything else he owns into a massive caravan and hit the road.

When Laban found out, he was furious - that represented a massive loss of income for him. Let's read what happened next:

Laban caught up with Jacob as he was camped in the hill country of Gilead, and he set up his camp not far from Jacob's. "What do you mean by deceiving me like this?" Laban demanded. "How dare you drag my daughters away like prisoners of war? Why did you slip away secretly? Why did you deceive me? And why didn't you say you wanted to leave? I would have given you a farewell feast, with singing and music, accompanied by tambourines and harps. -- Genesis 31:25–27 (NLT)

If you know the earlier parts of the story, then you know that Laban isn't being honest here. In fact, the whole story of Laban and Jacob's relationship is one of two con-men trying to out-fox each other. This is yet another example of Laban putting on a show, trying to look like a good guy and the bigger man. (Jacob had already, for instance, asked to leave and Laban refused). Jacob goes on to respond by telling the truth, in front of everyone. Laban was humiliated - not because Jacob lied about him or was cruel, but because he exposed who he really is to everyone.

Despite the fact that these men are 'family', they cannot get along. They are toxic for each other.

I don't know about the rest of you, but I've been in family situations like this - everyone walking on eggshells, choosing words carefully, posturing. We've talked before about the burnout cycle - how unhealthy groups (including families) go through this surface level false community until they explode like this. In the past, after Jacob and Laban blew up, they'd return to their previous (toxic) pattern - both lying to and trying to cheat each other.

Fortunately, this time both Jacob and Laban realize God is trying to break into this toxic cycle and do something different. So they decide to make a formal agreement - in front of everyone - to part ways. Let's read:

Then Laban replied to Jacob, "These women are my daughters, these children are my grandchildren, and these flocks are my flocks—in fact, everything you see is mine. But what can I do now about my daughters and their children? So come, let's make a covenant, you and I, and it will be a witness to our commitment."

So Jacob took a stone and set it up as a monument. Then he told his family members, "Gather some stones." So they gathered stones and piled them in a heap. Then Jacob and Laban sat down beside the pile of stones to eat a covenant meal. To commemorate the event, Laban called the place Jegar-sahadutha (which means "witness pile" in Aramaic), and Jacob called it Galeed (which means "witness pile" in Hebrew).

Then Laban declared, "This pile of stones will stand as a witness to remind us of the covenant we have made today." This explains why it was called Galeed—"Witness Pile." But it was also called Mizpah (which means "watchtower"), for Laban said, "May the Lord keep watch between us to make sure that we keep this covenant when we are out of each other's sight. If you mistreat my daughters or if you marry other wives, God will see it even if no one else does. He is a witness to this covenant between us. -- Genesis 31:43–50 (NLT)

They made a pile of rocks and shared a meal. Sounds weird to us, but this was the equivalent in the ancient world of going before a judge with lawyers and mediating. This is sort of a formal divorce between Jacob and Laban. They part ways. They draw a boundary and *literally* mark it - with a pile of stones.

I don't want us to miss the significance of this moment: this is a legal move to dissolve a family connection. And it's done because Laban and Jacob's relationship is toxic for *both* of them. The relationship runs counter to God's work in their lives.

(And by the way, hopefully you're saying, "Wow, I don't like how the women and children are being treated like property. Plus, didn't you say something about slaves?!" Good catch. Yes, all of that is terrible. And we're going to spend more time *there* next week. Don't worry. Jacob isn't getting off the hook!)

The stories of the patriarchs should caution us against making an idol of family. In these stories, the families are working *against* God's will in the world as often as they're working with God. Part of the thrill of the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph and his brothers is seeing how God is persistent, unrelenting and faithful specifically in the face of the families' failings.

BREAK

Turn with us to [Matthew 12](#). Probably the most radical challenge to our idolatry of family comes from Jesus himself. This is during Jesus' public ministry - he's traveling around teaching, healing, performing exorcisms and clashing with the authorities. Rumors have spread about him so his family - including his mother! - show up to take him home. They're basically there to try to get him back in line, to stop making waves. Look at Jesus' response:

As Jesus was speaking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. Someone told Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, and they want to speak to you."

Jesus asked, "Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?" Then he pointed to his disciples and said, "Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother!" -- Matthew 12:46-50 (NLT)

Jesus publicly disowns his family. Let that be shocking. (And however shocked and scandalized you feel, multiply it by ten and that's getting close to how the people of his day felt!)

Now take a deep breath. And look at what Jesus is doing:

Jesus redefines 'family' around not biological ties but the work of God. He says, "My family are the people who are receiving God's good news."

Friends, we love the idea of Jesus the revolutionary. Jesus who came to topple Caesar and stand up to the corrupt religious elite. The Jesus who flipped tables in the temple. But when it comes to the institution of the family, we step back. We clutch pearls and gasp and say, "Surely he couldn't have meant *that*?"

But Jesus understood that family can disrupt the work of God in our lives. Commitment to family can sabotage God's work in the world. And when it does, it becomes an idol.

Our families - nuclear or extended - are not the ones who deserve our first allegiance. That place belongs to God alone.

And in the best case scenario, our biological families are part of our spiritual families. That actually happens for Jesus - Mary and his siblings come around. Mary is one of the only people who follows Jesus all the way to the cross, and his brother James becomes the first leader of the church in Jerusalem.

But Jesus had to draw a hard boundary first. He had to say, "Blood doesn't obligate me to anything. I belong to God. And so do you." It was only that hard line that created the space for Mary, James and the rest to receive his good news.

I want to invite you to consider this morning your commitments to family. Do you feel the same obligation to your spiritual family that you do to your biological family?

Are there spaces in your biological family that are shallow, false or toxic? How is God inviting you to draw some boundaries and put up some markers there?

What does it look like for you to be, first and foremost, part of God's spiritual family?

Communion + Examen

Laban and Jacob parted over a meal. Jesus uses a meal to invite us to join his family.

Where is my biological family a source of healing and flourishing for me?

Where does my biological family run counter to God's call on my life?

What does my commitment to my spiritual family look like?

How is God calling me to commit to my spiritual family during Lent?

Assignment + Blessing

asdf