

Sunday, March 1, 2015
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "Families are Tricky"

According to tradition, Abraham is the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Followers of all three of these religious traditions embrace Abraham as a model of faith – one who shared a direct, personal relationship with God.

We read about the covenant, or agreement, that God made with Abraham and Sara.

The agreement is that God will make it so they can have children – giving birth to nations, to descendants as many as the stars in the sky.

As a symbol of this agreement, God changes their names from Abram, which means ‘exalted father’ to Abraham, father of all.

Sarai’s name which means ‘princess’ is changed to Sarah, ‘noblewoman.’

The covenant is that God will remain steadfast in his love for them and their descendants throughout all the generations....right down to us.

The New testament writers portrayed Abraham as a symbol of compassion, a model of faith and the pioneer of trust in God – exactly the type of person one would hope to have as a patriarch – leader of our family.

Of course there is more to the story, as there is to any family story. Abraham makes some pretty alarming decisions from time-to-time, sending his first-born son Ishmael out to the wilderness to die, nearly sacrificing his second son, Issac.

After Sara died, Abraham fathered six more sons, with another wife, Keturah, as reported in chapter 25.

We know little about those sons except that Abraham sent them away to the east and left everything he had to Isaac.

I love the Genesis stories because they portray human behaviors in a realistic fashion, always with the reassurance that no matter how terribly we mess up, God forgives, heals, restores and remains steady in his promise of eternal love.

Abraham, our father, is really no different than any other patriarch or family leader. Human, flawed, sometimes great and sometimes...not so great.

My title for today’s sermon came from a passing comment in a phone conversation earlier this week.

“Families are tricky.”

Families are the foundation of our lives.

It is presumably the place where we learn our values.

It is where we hopefully, experience and learn compassion.

Ideally, family is the place where we are always welcome.

Our best intentions and our deepest vulnerabilities are played out in the family context.

Everyone comes from some sort of family and every family has some sort of challenge.

In just the past week, my sister hurt my feelings, I forgot to call my nephew on his birthday, my father escaped from Noble Horizons during a fire drill, one son called to check in, one son didn't...aunts got sick, nieces and nephews changed jobs and relationships, on and on.

The point is that families are complex, intricate webs of relationships that require tending and care.

When attention is diverted, inevitably, someone feels left out or diminished.

This ideal we have of families (which is completely false), gets applied to non-family relationships such as church or community groups.

“We are like family” is an expression commonly used to describe congregations.

Perhaps we are.

We often know one another's vulnerabilities; we come together regularly; we journey through life or life stages together and we accept each person for who they are.

In families we accept behaviors that we might not choose in our friends.

We excuse weaknesses that we might not make room for at work or in the community.

We make room at the table for everyone who can make it to dinner – regardless.

Regardless of dress, style, sexual orientation, addiction, mental illness, sense of humor – or lack thereof, marital status, employment status, number of university degrees.

One of the joys people find in family reunions is witnessing the diversity in their own family and the changes that take place over the years.

Perhaps there is room to adopt this metaphor for life in the church.

When we gather at the communion table, we gather as brothers and sisters – children descended from Abraham and Sara.

As we gather we are reminded that our relatives in other faith traditions are also gathering – remembering their ancestor Abraham.

Family is not a passing phase – we are in families for life.

Our ability to adapt to the circumstances of the moment is part of the challenge and also the blessings.

No family remains exactly the same over the years.

There are always shifting paradigms and emerging issues.

The ability to navigate these well is the hallmark of a strong, healthy family.

It is when someone holds onto an outmoded tradition or refuses to welcome an inevitable change that families venture into the dysfunctional mode.

Being in a family takes work.

Being in a community takes work.

Earlier this week I was searching for the origin of the quote “Replace judgement with wonder” and I came upon a great list of ten practices designed to increase the likelihood of people working together productively.

I want to share these with you, adapted a bit to apply to families: *

1. **Be 100% present, extending and presuming welcome.** Set aside the usual distractions of things undone from yesterday, things to do tomorrow.

2. **Listen deeply.** Listen intently to what is said; listen to the feelings beneath the words. As Quaker writer Douglas Steere puts it, “Holy listening—to ‘listen’ another’s soul into life, into a condition of disclosure and discovery— may be almost the greatest service that any human being ever performs for another.” Listen to yourself as well as to others. Strive to achieve a balance between listening and reflecting, speaking and acting.

3. **It is never “share or die.”** You don’t have to share everything about yourself in order to be accepted. Share what you want others to know about you.

4. **No fixing.** Each of us is here (in life) to discover our own truths, to listen to our own inner teacher, to take our own inner journey. We are *not* here to set someone else straight, or to help right another’s wrong, to “fix” what we perceive as broken in another.

5. **Suspend judgment.** Set aside your judgments. By creating a space between judgments and reactions, we can listen to the other, and to ourselves, more fully.

6. **Identify assumptions.** Our assumptions are usually transparent to us, yet they undergird our worldview. By identifying our assumptions, we can then set them aside and open our viewpoints to greater possibilities.

7. **Speak your truth.** You are invited to say what is in your heart, trusting that your voice will be heard and your contribution respected. Your truth may be different from, even the opposite of, what another person in the family has said. Yet speaking your truth is simply that it is not debating with, or correcting, or interpreting what another has said. Respond from *your* center, not *to* another’s center. This behavior honors the previous speaker's comments without passing judgment. It also avoids introducing defensive feelings that distract from dialogue.

8. **Respect silence.** Silence is a rare gift in our busy world. After someone has spoken, take time to reflect without immediately filling the space with words. This applies to the speaker as well be comfortable leaving your words to resound in the silence, without refining or elaborating on what you have just said. This process allows others time to fully listen before reflecting on their own reactions.

9. **Maintain confidentiality.** Create a safe space by respecting the confidential nature and content of discussions held in the family. Allow what is said in the family to remain there.

10. **When things get difficult, turn to wonder.** If you find yourself disagreeing with another, becoming judgmental, or shutting down in defense, try turning to wonder: “I wonder what brought her to this place?” “I wonder what my reaction teaches me?” “I wonder what he’s feeling right now?”

Perhaps there is no place where it is more important than family that we turn our judgment to wonder.

It is just such a shift that allows us to honor our ancestor Abraham as a symbol of compassion, a model of faith and the pioneer of trust in God.

Someone, along the way, wondered at Abraham’s faith rather than judging his ability to parent.

As we move into our second week of Lent – why not adopt these ten strategies for your own household?

Post the list for all to see, establishing a family covenant, if you will.

Keep in mind however, that one of the most important lessons our ancestors have bequeathed to us is that it is ok to be less than perfect.

God is the only one who is perfect in this family and his steadfast love is guaranteed forever.

* From *Ideas that increase the likelihood of our working together productively*: Prepared by Sue Jones with considerable help from Gwen May and the writings of Parker Palmer, Marianne Novak Houston, Marcy Jackson, Judy Brown, Steve Mittelstet and The Dialogue Group. Rev. 4-1-2002. Adapted by Fenner and Jackson, 3/2004