

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
Christmas Around the Family  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
December 1, 2019

Genesis 17:15-22

Luke 1:26-38

The obituary made it appear that this was the perfect family. The deceased was a beloved doctor who gave himself to his patients. In fact, he died suddenly at the home of a patient whom he had gone to treat. His obituary offered a glowing description of Dr. Hodge and of his three sons. Two were physicians and the third was a District Attorney in Rayville, Louisiana. By all accounts his was the perfect, successful family. The only problem was that my grandfather, John Hodge, after whom I am named, along with his four siblings, were missing from that obituary. Why that matters, is that Dr. Hodge with the perfect family, had a first wife, my great-grandmother, whom he evidently never divorced and five other children, one of whom was my grandfather. It turns out that my great-grandmother fled a husband with an explosive temper and raised her children on her own working as an itinerant school teacher, often struggling to put food on the table and shoes on her children's feet. The most interesting part of this is that this story was buried and hidden from me and my siblings until I came across it last year. I suppose it might remind us that our family is not as perfect as we would like it to be. Our family is in fact, as imperfect as all other families.

The pressure to have and be the perfect family is something that I had assumed was a modern phenomenon. Something that had only arisen in our day and age. Yet, the more I read and research the more I realize this is nothing new. Which for me is fascinating because...and I hate to break it to you...there never have been any perfect families. And this includes the first families of the Bible. What do I mean by that? Let me enlighten you. Adam and Eve. They disobey God. They blame each other for the great fruit incident. Then one of their sons kills his sibling. First, there is Abraham and Sarah. Abraham doesn't trust that God will give him a son with Sarah and then laughs, as does Sarah, at the suggestion. Oh, and Abraham gives Sarah away twice to protect himself. Next, there is Mary and Joseph. For many of you I may be treading in dangerous waters here...but bear with me. Mary is an unmarried pregnant woman. Joseph is a reluctant groom, who only goes through with the marriage because of angelic intervention. Mary gives birth in a stable because Joseph forgot to go on Inns.com and make a reservation. Once Jesus is born, they become enemies of the state and then refugees. Once Jesus is a little older, they lose him in Jerusalem. At thirty, Jesus leaves home and his mother, abandoning his role as head of the family. Finally, Mary and her other children seek out Jesus to bring him home because they believe, as the Greek says, he is out of his mind. These are not

perfect families, which I believe is part of the point of these stories; that it is the point of Christmas, that God uses imperfect families to help save the world.

Adam and Eve are our distant relations and they gave birth to humanity, even though they are imperfect. Abraham and Sarah, for all their imperfections were those who received, and to the best of their ability lived out the covenant, which is still at work today. Mary and Joseph, for all their imperfections, reared Jesus, taught him the Torah and loved him. None of them were perfect and yet God worked in and through them to make the world the way God desired it to be. And by not being perfect, these families made it clear that it was God's work in and through them, and not their own perfect work, that saved and changed the world. The problem for us is that there is still this pressure to be the perfect family...and especially at Christmas. We are to be Norman Rockwell and not Griswold families from the Christmas Vacation movie. We are to have the perfect tree, the perfect ornaments on the tree, the perfect lights on the house, the perfect family picture, the perfect Christmas Card with the perfect family picture, the perfect gifts, with the perfect wrapping with the perfect tag on the perfect wrapping on the perfect presents. The pressure is on. The pressure builds. So, what I want to do for you this morning is to help you relieve the pressure. I want to do that by inviting you to repeat after me...you don't have to but you are invited to. Here goes.

"I am not perfect. My family is not perfect. But that is OK. It is OK because God uses imperfect people. Because God uses imperfect families to save the world. So God can use me and God can use my family to transform the world."

There, the pressure is off for this Christmas. It is off because we know that God can and does use imperfect people and imperfect families to do God's will in the world. My challenge for you then is to ask yourselves this question over this week. How is God using me as a less than perfect person; how is God using my family as a less than perfect family to help change the world for the better?