

It's interesting to hear the things that people, especially politicians, pundits, and media-savvy religious leaders, have to say about so-called Biblical family values. Many of these folks talking about said values seem to think they have the corner on declaring who has those values and who doesn't, they say what a family should look like and what it shouldn't. It's ironic considering that the Bible says a lot more about not judging others than what it does about any kind of so-called family values.

Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a family—in the way that dominate Western society tends to define family—one would be hard-pressed to find a family in scripture that most folks would want to emulate.

The first named family in scripture was Adam and Eve. As Myrn just read, one of their sons killed the other of their sons. This is hardly a good start when it comes to the Bible exhibiting qualities our families ought to emulate.

Also in Genesis is the story of Noah, who was described as “righteous and blameless among the people of his time” and yet he was the one who ended up getting drunk and passing out naked at his family's “We're Finally Off That Stupid Boat” party. When one of his son's found him, instead of respectfully covering up his father, he went and blabbed about it to the others, objectifying and humiliating his dad.

Other family stories in Genesis have to do with Father Abraham—the one with many sons—the one who is considered the founding father of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam . . . Abraham lied and told people his wife Sarah was his sister. Years later, when Sarah couldn't get pregnant, she told Abraham to procreate with her maid, which he did. Then, when that child—Ishmael—was born and grew-up a bit, Sarah sent the baby and his mother Hagar out into the desert to die, and Abraham stood back and let it happen. In the meantime, Sarah and Abraham finally did have a child together. His name was Isaac and when he became a certain age Abraham took him to an altar to sacrifice him based on a voice he was hearing that he claimed was God's. In the end, God intervened and saved Isaac.

Abraham's son Isaac would go on to father twins—Jacob and Esau—one of whom would steal the others birthright and they would be estranged for years as a result.

Isaac's son Jacob would go on to have twelve sons, ten of whom sold their brother, Joseph, into slavery but told their dad that he had been killed by a lion.

And that's just Genesis. Examples of Biblical family values we would do best NOT to emulate continue throughout the Old Testament. In Exodus Aaron betrays his brother Moses when he allows the Israelites to build a golden calf while Moses is away. In the Book of Job, Job's wife tells him to forsake God and, it could be argued, die of suicide “curse God and die” she tells him.(Job 2:9) In Second Samuel King David arranges for his lover's husband to be killed in battle so that she can be his—so much for respecting the vows of the marriage covenant. The list goes on and on.

And lest we jump to the old, “Well yes, but that was the Old Testament” defense of scripture, things don't improve much in terms of family life in the New Testament. There is nothing about any of Jesus' disciples being in a stable marriage—often one of the most highly-touted of Biblical family values in our society. And as for Jesus himself, the Bible says nothing of him being married but in Mark's gospel it does say that his own family thought he was losing his mind . . . “Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered . . . When Jesus' family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” (Mark 3:20-21) And after having been treated like that perhaps it's no wonder that, later in his ministry, Jesus said “For I have come to turn ‘a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law—a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.’” (Matthew 10:35-36) And, in

Luke's gospel he says, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple." (Luke 14:26) Granted, Jesus is likely using hyperbole to make a point about priorities in these passages—that we are to choose Christ above all things—but still, the bold statements call into question just what Biblical family values are.

Indeed, from the actual Biblical accounts we have of families, the values demonstrated include murder, adultery, lying, betrayal, neglect, theft, abandonment, banishment, and division.

And so it is that it is worth a hearty wondering when anyone spouts off about "Biblical family values." For the most part, many of the values exemplified by families in the Bible are not anything that most of us would seek to emulate. And why is that? Why is it so hard, in the Bible of all places, to find an example of a family with solid Biblical family values that are worthy of our emulation?

Well, it's because people in the families in the Bible are people like us . . . indeed they are like all people . . . they are fallible, broken, hurting, and sinful. As such, they fall short of perfection and when they fall short of perfection as individuals, so too do their families fall short.

So if these notions of Biblical family values to which we are being told to hold ourselves and each other accountable aren't really from the Bible, from whence do these notions about what a family should and should not be come?

Well, first and foremost from our own families. And for some of us who are pretty darn lucky, the values we learned from our families of origin were mostly positive. But for many folks, that isn't the case. And really, if we're honest with ourselves, most of us will admit that our families are less than perfect. Indeed, the only perfect families I know of are the ones in Normal Rockwell paintings and on TV.

And perhaps it's the prevalence of the cultural images of family promoted by TV shows of the 50s, 60s, and 70s that give us a false perception that family life is somehow easy, looks a certain way, and that our problems can be solved in a thirty minute episode or, if it's a really big problem, 60 minutes with the show being continued the following week. Think about it . . . *Leave it to Beaver*, *Father Knows Best*, *The Waltons*, *Little House on the Prairie* . . . The problem with a society setting expectations and standards for ourselves and our families based on these sources, or comparing our own families with the families in these stories, is that these stories aren't real.

But the Bible . . . this stuff is real. The Bible is full of the stories of real people struggling like we do. The Bible doesn't have any thirty-minute doses of entertaining escapism. I have no problem with thirty-minute doses of entertaining escapism. Indeed, I've watched at least seven episodes of *Animaniacs* just since Easter. Rather, I'm just inviting us to consider if expecting ourselves and our families to match up to fictional ideas created by Hollywood writers with fine imaginations is a wise way to set our expectations about real life. Because in real life, every family I've ever known has been, in some way, broken.

In our culture we tend to reserve the term "broken families" for people in families who have endured a divorce. But really, the marital status of two parents has little to do with how broken a family is. Families all around us are broken by addiction and greed and illness and over-work and childhood rivalries that morph into life-long resentments and infidelities and neglect and misplaced priorities and indifference and, especially in our modern world, the distractions and corrupting influence of being tethered to electronic devices that infringe on family time and open us up to worlds that it would be best for us to have remain closed. Every family I've ever known in 18 years of ministry has experienced brokenness—some folks just have the resources to cover it up a little better than others do.

And at this point you may be saying to yourself, "Uncle! Preacher Lady. We get it. We are broken. Our families are broken! We all fall short of the glory of God" And if that's where you are, have I got good news for you!

Remember all of those families in the Bible, the ones made up of murderers and liars and swindlers and adulterers? Families that, quite honestly, I think make our families look pretty good . . . Yes, well they are the same families that God chose to do God's work in the world. Isn't that a wonder? I mean really, an absolute wonder. If ever there was good news . . . God uses us in our brokenness.

Just look at the story of Cain—Adam and Eve's son who killed his brother Abel. Yes, God calls him to be accountable for what he has done wrong, God sets forth a righteous punishment on Cain and YET . . . God also shows Cain mercy. God does not wipe Cain from the face of the earth. Rather God says, “. . . anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over.” Then the LORD put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him. (Ex 4:15)

And that's not the only example of God being merciful . . . just think of the story of the Prodigal Son. When Jesus tells us that parable, he is revealing something important about God and what it means to be part of the family of God. That no matter how broken, sinful, distracted, or destructive we have been, God welcomes us back. God WANTS us back. “The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.” (Psalm 103:8)

Surely these are the Biblical family values to emulate . . . not so much the values shown by the families in scripture but rather the values exercised by our heavenly parent . . . compassion, grace, patience, forgiveness, and abiding love.

Indeed, regardless of how the chips are falling with our earthly families, we are part of the family of God. This means we, like Cain and the prodigal son and countless others upon whom God had mercy, are given a second chance. We are forgiven. We can try again. There is hope for us, hope for our kids, hope for our marriages, hope for our families . . . Hope for fresh starts, second chances, positives changes, and rekindled love. Hope . . . perhaps this is the greatest of all Biblical family values. Hope. Thanks be to God.