

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Genesis 12:1-3

SERMON TITLE: Family: A Core Value

At the beginning of a new year, we're spending some time taking a look at the five core values our congregation identified and adopted in the fall of last year. You'll see our five core values on the screens. Please read them with me: LOVE, FAMILY, OUTREACH, SPIRITUAL GROWTH, HOPE. Today, we're discussing FAMILY. Our scripture lesson is Genesis 12:1-3. Listen for the word of God. **SCRIPTURE TELLING.**

Now isn't it true that all of us have been shaped by our families, either for good or for ill? At their best, families give us a sense of identity and history, a place to belong, a place to be formed, a place to learn how live in relationship with others, a place to be safe. At their worst, families are dysfunctional, oppressive, abusive, and destructive.

And let's face it, perfect families are hard to come by. I'm reminded of a cartoon that appeared in *The New Yorker* magazine years ago, depicting the annual convention of folks from healthy, functional families—there were 4 or 5 people gathered in a giant, empty auditorium. (quoted in "The Church as Family," a sermon by Rev. Christina M. Neilson)

Come to think of it, of all the families lifted up in the scriptures, I can't think of a single one that would qualify as a "perfect" family. Even Jesus' family thought he had lost his mind, at one point!

But here's the amazing thing, through the messiness of it all, God apparently values family because God keeps working in and through families to bless the creation. According to Genesis 12, this is what God had in mind for Abram and his family. God spoke to Abram about what God would do with his family. First, Abram had to break some family ties to journey with God. This Abram did. And then there was a promise: *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who*

bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. Did you get that last part? God wants to bless all the families of the earth through this one expanding family! God values family.

Family is even an image used to describe the church. The New Testament says that we are children of God which makes us family with one another—brothers and sisters—not by biology, but by the Spirit. Baptism is the outward sign this family connection.

We even see ourselves as a part of Abram’s expanded spiritual family. The same God that blessed Abram and his family, also blessed Jesus, calling him beloved Son—and it’s the same God blessing us through the Spirit in our families and in our church family, to be a blessing to all the families of the earth.

Is the church family dysfunctional? Sure it is, but when we from time to time get this family-business straight, powerful things happen. A pastor tells this story: I had just finished a service which included a baptism and was preparing to turn off the lights in our church when I noticed a woman sitting in the first pew. When I approached her, she said her name was Mildred Cory, and she commented on how lovely the baptism had been. After another long pause, she added, “My daughter, Tina, just had a baby, and, well, the baby ought to be baptized, shouldn’t it?”

I suggested that Tina and her husband call me and we would discuss it. Mildred hesitated again, and then...she said, “Tina’s got no husband. She’s just 18, and she was confirmed in this church four years ago.”

Now the whole story tumbled out: “Then she got pregnant and decided to keep the baby and she wants to have it baptized here in her own church, but she’s nervous to come and talk to you, Reverend. She’s named the baby James—Jimmy.”

I said that I would take the request to the church board for approval. When the matter came up at the next meeting, I explained the situation...But [they perceived a] problem: our congregation has a custom in which the pastor asks, “Who stands with this child?” and then the whole extended family of the little one rises and remains standing for the ceremony. They all realized what would happen: Tina would stand with little Jimmy in her arms, the father no longer around, and Mildred Cory the only one who would stand when the question was asked. It hurt each of us to think about it. But the board approved the baptism. It was scheduled for the last Sunday in Advent.

The church was full that day. Down the aisle came Tina, nervously, briskly,...holding month-old Jimmy. This young mother was so alone. It would be a hard life for this pair.

I read the opening part of the service and then, looking for Mildred Cory, I asked my question: “Who stands with this child?” I nodded at Mildred slightly, to coax her to her feet. She rose slowly, looking to either side, and then returned my smile.

My eyes went back to my service book. I was just about to ask Tina the parent’s questions when I became aware of movement in the pews. Angus McDowell, an elder whose grandson had been baptized when Mildred was present a few weeks earlier, had stood up, along with his wife Minnie. Then a couple of other elders stood. Then the sixth-grade Sunday school teacher, then a new young couple in church, and soon, before my incredulous eyes, the whole church was standing up with little Jimmy.

Tina was crying. Mildred Cory held on to the pew as though she was standing on the deck of a rocking ship. The Scripture reading that morning included this verse from the first letter of John: *See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are.* (Source unknown)

My brothers and sisters, if FAMILY is indeed going to be a core value of our church, then we need to ask ourselves as a congregation and as families within the congregation: How will all the families of the earth be blessed through us?