

That's Just Messed Up

Texts: **2 Samuel 13:1-21, 28-29; 2 Samuel 18: 5-15, 31-33**; Brené Brown on belonging

In the movie, ***You've Got Mail***, from way back in 1998, there's a scene where Tom Hanks' character (Joe Fox) first meets Meg Ryan's character (Kathleen Kelly). Fox has two adorable children with him when he goes into Kelly's children's bookstore, and Kelly asks Fox whether they're his children. Introducing the little girl first, he says, "No, this is Annabelle and she's my aunt." And Kelly says, "You're aunt, I don't think so!" "No," says Fox, "She's my aunt! She's my grandfather's daughter." "Oh," says Kelly to the little boy, Matt, "let me guess then, you're his uncle!" "No," says Matt, "I'm his brother!" "That's right," says Fox, "Matt is my father's son, so that makes him my brother. We are an American family!"

And they ARE an American family! In modern America, families are no longer defined by just one mom and one dad and some kids. Nowadays, grandfathers and fathers are indeed having children younger than first sons, single mothers are raising kids on their own, single fathers are out there too, grandparents are raising grandchildren, children are being raised by two mothers or two fathers, and now with Caitlyn Jenner, formerly known as Bruce Jenner, some kids now have a mother who used to be their father. And, why, sometimes dads who are almost 60 even have kids who are not yet out of elementary school – that'd be me, with Adam! We've really got it all. And mostly it works, somehow. People are doing the best they can with what they've got, figuring out how to make ends meet and make sure the kids grow up right, no matter what their situation.

Most situations are less than ideal, especially in the midst of a pandemic, but most kids will be all right anyway, as long as they grow up in an environment filled with love. Still, and I think it's too often, you hear people saying, "Hoo, boy, what a country we are. What's going to become of us. I just wish we could go back to the old days when we had the kinds of families that God likes and approves of, you know, like Bible families." I can see why people might think that. Bible families seem straightforward and simple.

Let's look at some Biblical families.

Let's start with that prototypical couple, Adam and Eve, and the first family. Are people saying we should start with the Biblical example, and a marriage should be between a man and his transgender clone? Think about it. That's kind of what it says!

How about Abraham and his family? What about them? Abraham has Isaac, the child of the promise, with Sarah, and that's just great. But Abraham had a kid with the nanny first, okay, that is, with his wife's maidservant, and that boy's name was Ishmael. Naturally the nanny got kicked out with her kid, and that has caused resentments. Ishmael, of course, is considered to be the father of all Arabs and Isaac the father of all Israelites, and there might have been some problems in the paper recently about Israel and the Arabs, so bad example.

Isaac must have had a better family. Let's take them as our example family instead. But, of course, Isaac's kids, Esau and Jacob did have a little fight about a mess of potage and a birthright, so that Esau, the dumb one, wanted to kill Jacob, the conniving one, and Jacob had to flee to his uncle. So, bad example. Sorry.

Maybe we should take Jacob's family as an example of the perfect Biblical family? But then we look and what do we see? Twelve sons, one daughter, two wives, two more nannies involved, and a plot by the older brothers to sell arrogant younger brother Joseph into slavery. Okay, bad example.

Let's just catch up with David. Now here's a man after God's own heart. The Bible says so twice, once in the Old Testament and once in the new: David is a man after God's own heart. He must have our model Biblical family. So why don't we get away from our American crazy families and just go back to having Bible families like King David's? Well, um, oo-kay! By now you must be getting suspicious! David married Michal, the daughter of the old king, Saul. But his family life wasn't great. Then David married Abigail, the wife of Naboth. Naboth was a man who David killed, when he refused to pay David protection money on his vineyard. And David took his wife, Abigail, for good measure. And David also married Ahinoam, with whom he had a son, Amnon. And he married Maacah, with whom he had another son, Absalom, and a daughter Tamar. And he had Bathsheba as a wife, who used to be Uriah's wife, before David committed adultery with her and then had her husband killed. Bathsheba was ultimately the mother of Solomon. All in all, David had at least 8 wives and 10 concubines. And people are saying American families might be messed up compared to Biblical families?

Today we heard about just how messed up David's family was. Amnon, one of David's sons, fell in love with his half sister, Tamar. Tamar was an honorable woman, so Amnon asked his cousin, Jonadab, the son of David's brother, to figure out a way he could rape his half-sister. Jonadab came up with a scheme, and that's what went down, despite Tamar's eloquent plea, begging her half-brother not to commit such a terrible act. When David heard about it, he was furious. I mean, what dad wouldn't be furious if his son raped his daughter? The text explicitly tells us David was furious. It also tells us that he did nothing about it. Not. One. Thing. That's messed up.

It's left up to Tamar's brother - her full brother - Absalom, to make sure that justice is done. In due course, he does, killing Amnon. There's a bit of toing and froing, but then Absalom takes up arms against his father David and rebels. David has to flee. But David is a good general, and a scheming conniver – just read the story yourself, it's pretty amazing! – and his men get the upper hand. Absalom is caught – literally – hanging in a tree by his hair and is killed. David wins, but at the cost of his son – a good son, who was defending his sister, a good son who only asked for justice from his father, a son whom David truly loved.

David cries out his grief for Absalom as he never did for Amnon the rapist. For Absalom the good brother, David weeps: "O my son Absalom! My son, my son Absalom! If only I had died instead of you— O Absalom, my son, my son!" "If only I had died instead of you," David cries in his grief, but from what we know of David, we are never quite sure if that's true, and that is messed up.

David's children put David's qualities on display: Tamar has his eloquence; Amnon has his insatiable lust and his impulsive temperament; Absalom has his desire for justice, and perhaps some of his vanity as well; Solomon had his penchant for many wives. And it's a disaster! If America had more families that were like Bible families, we'd be in an even bigger mess than we are in now!

If we're honest, we probably do have families that are a *little* like Bible families. We have sibling rivalries that sometimes get out of hand. We have second wives, second families, families late in life, families where children squabble, families with step mothers and step fathers, families with children before marriage and outside of marriage. We have families like that, and we come from families like that, families that weren't perfect, families where alcohol played too big a part, and not a good one, families where parents fought and sometimes split, families where we were put down by parents or siblings, families where children were treated unfairly, or neglected, or spoiled, or, God forbid, even worse.

If your family is somehow messed up, if you come from a family that was messed up, if you yourself are somehow messed up, you might think that puts you outside the pale, that it's too late for you, that you have no place with God. But I want you to know right now that that doesn't disqualify you from God's love. That doesn't put you outside the bounds of God's plan. That doesn't eliminate you from God's people. If it did, there wouldn't have been a family in the Bible that God could have worked with. There wouldn't have been a person in the Scriptures that God could have called God's own.

David, screwed up though he was, could still be a man after God's own heart. David's family, screwed up though it was, was still the family that produced the Messiah. God understands. God accepts. God loves.

It is for people like David and his family, screwed up people and screwed up families, that Christ died. It's sinful, messed up, disastrous families, and sinful, messed up, disastrous people that Jesus came to find and to save. If that's you, that's okay. You're not alone. God loves you and God accepts you. And if you had an ideal childhood, a perfect marriage, a wonderful flawless family life, don't worry, that's okay as well! God loves you too!

The point is, it doesn't matter who you are, or where you've come from, there's a place for you here in Jesus' family. It doesn't matter what your American family looks like, even if it looks like a Biblical family. God still has a place for you. And thank God for that! Amen