

“But you’re so *normal*”

Galatians 4: 4-7

Dec. 28, 2014

By Chad Martin

This week my household shuddered at the news of the latest shooting in Lancaster. Two blocks from our house. Across the street from my daughter’s bus stop. At 3:00 in the afternoon. Thank God they weren’t on the bus this past Monday afternoon when an unidentified teenager was shot several times and stumbled to the corner before collapsing.

How shall we reconcile a world of never-ending violence with all the niceties of Christmas?

Let us begin where we left off last Sunday. Susan read a poem by Madeleine L’Engle that may have gotten lost amidst the joy of the children’s Christmas program. Let us begin by reading it again.

The Risk of Birth

This is no time for a child to be born, With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born, In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn- Yet here did the Saviour make his home.

When is the time for love to be born? The inn is full on the planet earth, And by
a comet the sky is torn- Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.^[1]

This is the very heart of the good news of Christmas: Love still takes the risk of birth—
even into a world of violence and pain.

Every third year the lectionary cycle of bible texts recommended for each Sunday suggests Matthew 2, the slaughter of the innocents, for this Sunday. Mercifully that is not the case this year, though maybe it would be fitting.

Instead I invite you to hear the good news presented by the apostle Paul in Galatians. And I even invite you to hunt for good news amidst a text that rarely sees the light of day on Sunday mornings: the genealogy of Jesus at the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew: “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham. Abraham begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Judas and his brethren; and Judas begat Phares and Zara of Thamar,” and so on.

You may wonder why you decided to make your way to church on the Sunday after

Christmas to be rewarded only with talk of a genealogy. Geez. But I am here to tell you this morning that I think there is powerful good news for us nestled amongst that string of ancient names and the very Lutheran-sounding apostle. Good news for us regardless of how your Christmas came and went. And moreover, I even want to tell you I think there is good news here for those shot on the streets of Lancaster this fall. And even for those doing the shooting. There is good news even for such as these, God help them.

It comes to us bound up in two bible passages about family.

Despite all our theologizing about the coming of the Christ child, the reality is that for almost all of us, Christmas is about family. It is about everything in our families—the good, the bad and the ugly. We each have our own journeys with this. Thankfully, for many of us, the good outweighs the bad. But it is also a time when the imperfections of our families stand out. Too much time cooped up at home. Too little of substance to talk about. Memories of lost loved ones too close to the surface. Perhaps too few gathered due to death or divorce or children who have grown and left. Family is messy and complicated, even as it is loving and steadfast.

Moreover, families increasingly come in all shapes and sizes. Last Sunday Faith Cowell shared that she and Kay Reist were recently invited to another Mennonite church to tell about their experiences as a same-sex couple. Afterward the pastor greeted them with a response something like, “But you’re so *normal*.” What does that even mean? The reality is, when it comes to family, there is no normal.

As one pastor, writing in *The Christian Century*, recently observed, “We have blended families, same-sex families, adoptive families, and single parent families.”^[2]

Yet the activities of this time of year can perpetuate an image of the ideal family that none of our actual families seem able to duplicate. This writer describes his feelings upon receiving a Christmas card in the mail recently:

There was a father with a full head of close-cropped black hair, a mother with long blond tresses and an expensive-looking scarf, and four kids of varying ages, each one smiling perfectly, each in a tasteful holiday sweater, eyes peaceful, as if there were no place they’d rather be. All six were set against a holiday backdrop of snow-dusted trees atop a soft, rolling hill. Underneath their photo their name was printed: “The Bronnings.”

I flinched. “Man, the Bronnings are really *something*. Why can’t we ever get a family photograph that doesn’t feature someone squinting? How did they get all those kids to wear wool sweaters? How big is that backyard?” All of which boiled down to: “Who are these perfect creeps?” I turned the card over. It was an advertisement for Shutterfly.

If this rings familiar, the good news is that Jesus was born into a messy and complicated family too. As this pastor writes, “I don’t know what a perfect first-century family looked like, but I’m certain that Joseph and Mary didn’t fit the ideal. Joseph had no money. He had no safe place for his wife to give birth and no plausible explanation for her pregnancy.”

Furthermore, the gospel of Matthew codifies the messiness in the way he documented the family tree of Jesus. Tamar, Bathsheba and Ruth are all listed in the ancestry of the Son of God. Matthew goes out of his way to add these three women, reminding us of ancient stories of adultery, violence and refugees. According to the gospel, that is what makes for a holy family.

Here is the good news for us—again in the words of this pastor writer: “It’s no coincidence that Christ was born into a shaky, uncertain family. God goes where [God] is needed... Is your family imperfect? Take heart. So was Christ’s.”

God goes where God is needed. This is the heart of the good news of Christmas.

My prayer for you this Christmas season is that you may rest in the good news of God coming to you in the midst of your imperfect reality. May this season be a time to remember who you are in the eyes of the Holy One. May you remember what brings your heart joy and fulfillment and may you find space for those things amidst the hubbub.

Yet there is a deeper good news about family to be found in the verses from Galatians: You are children of God.

Let us unpack this a bit. The letter Paul wrote to the Galatian church is so Paul. The heart of it is an argument between Paul and contrarian preachers who were making a mess of things there. The argument was about whether or not followers of Jesus should also be circumcised as Jews and subservient to the holy codes of the Torah. Paul’s response was emphatic and angry. Christ transcends the law of the Torah. Just a few verses before today’s reading in Galatians Paul famously wrote, “There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” This is the heart of Paul’s theology.

From there he continues with these verses from chapter 4, and let me restate what he said. Paul outlines a rational progression. Jesus Christ was the Son of God. The spirit of the living Christ resides in our hearts. And that makes us all adopted sons and daughters of God; children like Christ. It’s actually profoundly simple. Yet so hard to truly embrace in our heart of hearts. We are children of God.

The critical piece is that this is all grace, all a gift from God reaching toward us.

This is of course a basic theological tenet of Protestantism going back to the Reformation. Martin Luther loved the book of Galatians because it was Paul’s most raw and direct, most emotionally charged, explanation of grace.

I remember studying alongside Presbyterian students in seminary and hearing this basic Protestant tenet explained clearly for the first time. I realized this is something missing from a lot of Mennonite theology. Grace. We have something to learn from our mainline brothers and sisters here about God’s love.

The good news, the saving grace of it is a simple, sacred truth. Before everything else, above everything else, God loves us as we are. That’s it. No strings attached. There is nothing to be earned. God loves us as we are. Regardless of whatever earthly notion of family we experience, God has made a home for us and within us.

As one writer reflects:

Post-Christmas letdown may be setting in with all its attendant guilt—about the Christmas cards that didn't get sent, the hoped-for family harmony that didn't quite happen, the overeating now apparent on the bathroom scale. One way of dealing with that guilt is by making "new year's resolutions" about how we will change, how we will make a fresh start with the turning of the calendar. And we know how well that usually turns out.

Don't go back to that life... Paul tells us... God's gift to us will not be revoked, regardless of how well we live up to our own expectations or the expectations of others.[3]

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The beauty of it is that everything flows from this. The more we can receive and embrace this gift, the more we are able to recognize and embrace and love ourselves for who we are. To accept that we are sons and daughters of God is to claim our lives as holy as they are.

Last night Jess and I saw the movie *Wild*. It's the story of Cheryl Strayer, based on her memoir, about her hiking hundreds of miles on the Pacific Coast Trail. She decided to hike the trail by herself one day when she had hit rock bottom and realized her life was a train wreck shattered by tragedy and loss. It takes hundreds of miles of hiking by herself in the wilderness to finally accept this delicate truth.

In her words, "It was my life - like all lives, mysterious and irrevocable and sacred. So very close, so very present, so very belonging to me."

Your lives are sacred.

To claim that God has made us a holy family is not only good news for us, whose earthly families are broken, blended, mixed and messy—this is good news for a world hurting with violence.

My prayer for you this day is that you may know in the marrow of your bones, in every chamber of your heart, that God loves you as you are. My prayer for you this day is that you may know you are part of God's holy family. May you know that God's gift to us will not be revoked, regardless of how well we live up to our own expectations or the expectations of others.

My prayer this day is that the 18-year-old young man shot on East King Street knows in every chamber of his bleeding heart that God's gift to him will not be revoked. My prayer this day is that every victim of gun violence – of violence of any kind – in this city knows God's gift to them will not be revoked.

My prayer is that even those who perpetrate violence – those called "wreckless" and "out of control" and presumed to be without remorse, even Christian Antwan Williams now sitting in jail charged with attempted homicide in the shooting last Monday[4] – that even they know God's gift to them will not be revoked, regardless of how well they live up to

their own expectations or the expectations of others.

They are sons and daughters of God. Their lives are holy and sacred.

May we all abide in the love of the one who calls us her children.

[1] I think this poem was first published in a poetry collection by L'Engle of the same title in 1974. It has been copied in numerous online sources.

[2] Matt Fitzgerald, "God among the imperfect," in *The Christian Century* (Dec. 24, 2014), pp. 10-11. The next several quotations are from this article. See also Amanda Marcotte, "Non-Traditional Families Are The New Tradition," on *Slate* (Dec. 24, 2014). Online at:

http://www.slate.com/blogs/xx_factor/2014/12/24/the_death_of_the_nuclear_family_new_research_shows_most_kids_are_raised.html. Accessed Dec. 29, 2014.

[3] Elisabeth Johnson, "Commentary on Galatians 4:4-7," on *Working Preacher* (Jan. 1, 2012). Online at:

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1128. Accessed Dec. 22, 2014.

[4] See "19-Year-Old Charged in Dec. 22 Lancaster City Shooting," on *Lancaster Online* (Dec. 26, 2014). Online at: http://lancasteronline.com/news/health/year-old-charged-in-dec-lancaster-city-shooting/article_d516bd43-726a-572e-8b5b-2133504345c1.html.

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