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**Title:** FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Jesus' last expressed concern was for the welfare of his mother — family. The crowds he had fed and healed had evaporated. The disciples he had led and taught had denied and deserted him. It felt like his Father had abandoned him too. It was family - his mother, his aunt, and the other Mary who hung in to the bitter end.

Life is about family. Few people enjoy being alone all of the time. We are social animals needing relationships. Norman Wirzba in his book **Living The Sabbath** says, "We do not live alone or as rugged individualists. We need each other. In a very real sense, the health of human living, its successes and fulfillment, depends on the health and wholeness of many relations....."(1) For most of us family relationships are the most important. Without family we are like a bird with a broken wing.

Loren Eiseley, who gave us the famous "Star-fish Thrower" story, was a palaeontologist, one who studies old bones. In **The Night Country**, he tells of being invited to an old farmstead in a S. W. desert of the US by a family who was tired of their 80 year old grandfather Mr. Hareny keeping a human skull in the china closet--Aunt Lucinda's. After small talk, the old man started to spill his story.

"This was Apache country when I was born, and they did not take kindly to the settlers moving in. There was no barbed wire when we moved here from Bighorn, Texas. My mother died on the trail. One day my father went to work but did not come home. The next morning my older sister, Lucinda, about ten, who was raising me, was standing in the door watching for father to come home when the Apache picked her off from a Mesquite bush. They grabbed me and raised me as an Apache. When I was in my late teens, they sent me back to the white settlers.

Years later I rode back to the old place long since abandoned. I found my sister's skull in a drift of sand. I knew I should bury her properly. In the end I couldn't. She was the only kin I had so I took her up gently, brushed the sand off of her face and I rode back with her and I kept Lucinda in the china closet." (2)

We inherit with our genes and absorb with our mother's milk something we cannot shake even if we want to--family. We keep old photographs and letters because they remind us of family.

When Morrie Schwartz was dying of Lou Gehrig's disease Mitch Albom, his former student, visited him every Tuesday. In the book **Tuesdays with Morrie**, Schwartz says, "It became quite clear to me as I've been sick. If you don't have the support and love of a caring family, you don't have much at all" ... "The fact is there is no foundation, no secure ground upon which people may stand if it isn't family." (3)

We have in the Bible the multigenerational family story of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. When we think of them, we think of giant heroes of faith, the founders of the Hebrew people. From them we received the revelation of one God, a covenant, a promise and a mission. Today

I want you to hear this story in a different key-- family relationships. What can we learn from them that might help us in our family relationships?

Abraham came from Chaldea where the Tigris and the Euphrates empty into the Persian Gulf. The Chaldeans worshiped the moon god and sacrificed children. His father Terah moved his whole extended family, including Abraham and Sarah, north to Haran modern Turkey. It was here that Abraham got his call and revelations. Not only did Abraham conclude there was only one God, but also that he was different. Instead of being a god of politics, of war, of a certain tribe or city this was a God of " family love." That is significant for our story.

Slowly they made their way down to Canaan. During a famine they went to Egypt. Abraham lied about his relationship to Sarah and she picked up a maid named Hagar. Then it was back to the promised land.

I imagine Abraham and Sarah in the evening sitting in their tent many years later each with a bowl of hot camel's milk when Sarah says, "That promise about having many descendents. Are you sure you heard that right? Your hearing is not what it used to be. Maybe if you took Hagar and had a son with her I could adopt him as my son. It is legal you know. That way we could get started." "It's worth a try," Abraham answers. The faith of our heroes is very low.

Hagar has a son Ishmael. About thirteen years later Sarah gives birth to a son Isaac. After Isaac's weaning party, I imagine Sarah and Abraham are getting ready for bed with their hot milk. Sarah says, "You know what I saw today, Isaac and Ishmael were fighting." "Come on, they are just boys horsing around - nothing to worry about," replies Abraham. Sarah responds, "No, Ishmael is trying to take over. I don't like it . Get him out of here." "Ok. Ok." says Abraham. "Do you promise to send him away?" -- Abraham hesitates--"It is either him or me." "Ok." Abraham cannot sleep that night. He loves both his sons. He has to make a decision. He could marry Hagar, and then he could raise his sons together but Sarah would throw a fit. He could take Hagar as a concubine so the sons could be together even though Isaac would rank higher. Instead he gives in to Sarah's demand.

As promised, in the morning against his will he prepares some trail mix and tells Hagar and Ishmael to leave. After they say their goodbyes Ishmael turns to his father once more. "Dad, dad how can you do this to me?" Abraham shuffles back to the tent without looking up. All know that they will never see each other again. Family disunity and violence lead to separation and loneliness. The boys see each other again only briefly to bury their father. Inasmuch as Isaac is the father of the Hebrews and Ishmael the father of the Arabs, reconciliation has not happened yet. Is that how racism starts?

Isaac is not brilliant like his father or colourful like his son, but to his credit he passes on the faith and keeps hope alive. Isaac marries Rebecca. They have twin sons Esau and Jacob. Again the parents pick favourites with drastic results. When Isaac is old and going blind it's time to pass on the birthright. It is meant to be a blessing, but instead it becomes a curse. Rebecca manipulates things so that Jacob gets it instead of Esau. Rebecca reaches a very low point when she takes advantage of her spouse's handicap for her own benefit . That is raw family

violence. The family is ripped apart. Jacob goes to live with his uncle Laban because Esau wants to kill him.

He marries sisters Leah and Rachel, but he loves Rachel more than Leah. Favouritism is becoming a family tradition. If you are going to have more than one spouse at a time, at least treat them equally. Jacob becomes rich, but his favourite wife Rachel has no son. It is not as though Jacob is just lying around. Well maybe he is. Leah gives him six sons, her maid two. Rachel's maid has two (they try grandma Sarah's trick). Finally Rachel has two, Joseph the oldest, but then she dies giving birth to Benjamin.

Playing favourites again leads to trouble. Joseph now becomes Jacob's favourite, and he wants the whole world to know it. Maybe Joseph reminds him of his favourite wife. He gives him a fancy coat. When Joseph visits his half-brothers taking care of father's sheep, they can't suck it up anymore. They want to kill him. Reuben, Joseph's half-brother thinks this is going too far. They throw him in a cistern. They take his coat and dip it in goat's blood and cook up a story for their father. No DNA testing. When Reuben is not watching they fish him out and sell him to a caravan heading for Egypt. Something happens to Joseph on that trip. The egotistical, spoiled, dreaming brat becomes a man. Potiphar likes him and his work. Potiphar's wife likes him too, and this lands him in jail. When Pharaoh has a dream about cows and corn, they call on Joseph to interpret it. As a result, he becomes the most powerful person in Egypt next to Pharaoh.

Canaan has a famine. A bad one. Jacob sends his boys to Egypt to buy corn. Whom do they have to deal with but Joseph their half-brother. He recognizes them but they do not recognize him. When they come to buy food for the third time, the scene is charged and tense. They are afraid. Joseph has had a table prepared for them and water to wash their feet. When they are seated, Joseph comes in, sends the servants out of the room and trying to keep his emotions under control asks, "Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?" They answered, "Yes our father is alive and well." Joseph sees Benjamin..."Is this your youngest brother of whom you told me?" Before they can answer, Joseph breaks down and weeps. After he composes himself, he tells his half-brothers who he is and tells them to bring the whole family to Egypt. Joseph has power, prestige, wealth, and fame, but he realizes that more than anything else he needs family.

But that old family violence has endless tentacles. When Jacob dies, his brothers are scared. What if Joseph is good to us only because of father and now he is going to exact revenge. Joseph teaches us what forgiveness is all about. Looking at his family like this you wonder where did he learn it? To have a real family there has to be real forgiveness.

The heroines in our story Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel, are strong women. They all have fertility problems. They plead with God to give them a son necessary for enhancing their self-worth and social standing in their culture. But once Sarah and Rebecca have their prayer answered and have their sons, they become abusive and use their sons to wreck their families. When we receive what we pray for, we need to be very careful of what it does to us and how it affects others.

Where do we get our need for family satisfied? or do we? We cannot go back to the patriarchal family style. Few of us live or worship with our children, parents, or grand children. We visit as often as possible but the dynamics are different. Some of us are married, some are single, some are separated, some divorced, some are widowed or remarried. How do we get that basic human need for family met?

Referring to Luke's story of the healing of the ten lepers Wirzba says " ... health is in membership [family] not isolation." 4. Is it possible that we as a church become family to each other where we meet some of each other's needs, share our visions and are responsible to each other? We promised that when we joined the church.

It may be tempting to limit our family to blood relatives and the church family to those who think and look like us. But our family needs to go far beyond that to those who are not like us--people of other ethnic backgrounds, of other races, of other cultures, the unclean, the poor, the sick, the powerless.

Paul saw the church as the family of God. That is who we are. But that family needs to become real here and now, among us in this place. In many ways we are that, but there is room for improvement.

Justin Batra came to our church a few times awhile back. We tried to befriend him. We gave him rides to church. Others did other things, but he stopped coming. He was different. When you saw him on the street or in the library, he was always alone. His little leather briefcase was his only and constant companion. He died last March. The obituary read, "no known relatives." 5 He was raised an orphan and died alone. We did not become family to him.

We can all think of persons we hoped would become part of our church family but they didn't.

Carol and I like to watch **Heartland**. It is kind of soapy story, but has nice horses and beautiful foothills scenery. It is the story of a grandfather, Jack, and his grand-daughters. He has a rough austere exterior. But underneath all that macho is a loving character trying to ranch with two granddaughters. Their father has left them. Their mother was killed in an accident.

A probation officer who recognises Jack as a straight shooter brings him Ty out on probation. Jack reads Ty the riot act. No closer than ten feet from the granddaughters and so on. Ty turns out to be likable, a good reliable worker, and slowly Jack changes his mind about him. He runs away once because he thinks his useless father needs him. He comes back beaten up, but slowly they accept him again. The horses accept him first.

Mallory is a snoopy, snooty, loudmouth about twelve. Her parents drop her off at the ranch because they don't want her along on their singing tour. She is supposed to go to camp, but she weasels out of it. They put her in a boarding school, but she runs away and ends up back in **Heartland** because this is where family is happening.

I thought about our church in that connection. Where is family happening here? Where are we happy and comfortable enough with each other that others want to belong? This is part of what family is all about, letting others know there's someone who is watching out for them. In keeping

with our church family metaphor, have we practiced birth control long enough? Maybe it's time to take some chances.

1. Norman Wirzba **Living the Sabbath** Brazon Press 2006. p.46

2.Loren Eiseley **The Night Country** Scribner 1971

3.Mitch Albom **Tuesdays With Morrie**, Broadway 1997, p.91

4. *ibid* p.92

5.Justin Batra died Mar., 17, 2009 **Lethbridge Herald**