



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for December 22, 2019
“Christmas Outside the Box: Family”
Speaker: Tom Grieb
Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

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Perfection Is Illusive

We all know Clark W. Griswold as the well-meaning, big hearted, bumbler of *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*.

Clark gave his all in pursuit of “*a fun-filled, old fashioned family Christmas*”—whatever that is.

The movie, while a bit irreverent, is a holiday tradition around the Grieb household. We have watched it so many times we can quote just about every line.

Let’s face it, we do it every year. When it comes to the holidays we try our best to make things just about as perfect as we can and yet every year we find that perfection is awfully illusive.

While not quite the Christmas train wreck of Clark W. Griswold fame, there’s always something that keeps things from being less than perfect for the Griebs.

- Years ago we had our heater go out on Christmas Day.
- We’ve had at least three Christmas trees to fall over down through the years, all at very inopportune times.
- We’ve had our share of illness that has interrupted our best laid plans.
- We had a colossal dog fight underneath the kitchen table while eating dinner on Christmas Eve.
- This year our tree is about as crooked as can possible be.

It’s Not a Perfect World

Christmas, as bright as it is, has a way of shining a spotlight on the whole of life.

Everything is accentuated this time of year and we are left to process every bit of it—the good **and** the bad.

We realize it is not a perfect world, particularly when it comes to family. Individually, we are not perfect and neither are those closest to us.

While for some, Christmas is the most wonderful time of the year. For others, it can be downright painful with family having a lot to do with that.

For some, things can get so bad that their hearts are left wanting at best and broken-hearted at worst. They recall times when things were seemingly better than they are right now and wish things were different.

At Christmas, we tend to remember our loved ones who have passed. For some, their grief is all the more pronounced because of the recent death of a loved one.

My dad died four years ago right before Christmas and, quite honestly, Christmas hasn't been the same since.

All of us can remember Christmases when things haven't gone as well as we would have liked.

Whenever that kind of thing happens, it's hard to focus on the One we're supposed to celebrate, the One who came in all love to make life worth living, no matter how bad our circumstances seem.

That's all the more reason to seek after Christ and experience the solace he offers in the midst of whatever we may be facing.

"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness," says Jesus, "and all these things shall be added to you." (Matthew 6:33)

A Journey That Started with Family

As we consider the birth of Jesus this Christmas, let's agree that family is very much an important part of that story.

The account of Christ's birth begins with the angel Gabriel approaching Mary and telling her about how highly favored she was.

She would bear a Son and he would be called the Son of the Most High. God would give him the throne of his ancestor David and of his kingdom there would be no end.

Since she was a virgin, Mary wondered aloud how any of this could ever come about.

"For nothing is impossible for God." (Luke 1:37)

Talking about God making the impossible possible, Mary's relative, Elizabeth was pregnant as well, even though she was well past her childbearing years.

Elizabeth had long thought she just wouldn't have any children. God though had a different plan.

Mary and Elizabeth were on a common journey together, a journey that started with family.

Jesus was the Promised One who was to come and John was the one who announced that coming.

Mary and Elizabeth not only gave birth at nearly the same time, but the life work of their sons was nearly the same as well. John and Jesus were all about ushering in the Kingdom of God.

Mary and Elizabeth, each in their own way, rejoiced over the marvelous things their sons did. They also suffered the pain of losing them. John was beheaded and Jesus was crucified.

Mary and Elizabeth's faith though would sustain them, as would their love for each other.

May the same take place in our own families.

Drawn to Family

We are drawn to family at Christmas and so we should be. It has been that way since the very beginning.

The rhythm around the church is this. I have noticed it at every church I've served. There are a lot of public events that take place the first couple of weeks of Advent. The closer you get to Christmas though, the focus turns from public events to family events.

Time spent at parties and programs gives way to time at home.

Let me say it again, we are drawn to family at Christmas. That was certainly the case for Mary as she traveled to visit her relative, Elizabeth.

I'm of the mind that Mary and Elizabeth needed one another.

Mary upon hearing that Elizabeth was pregnant wanted to find out what was going on with her so she could better understand what was going on in her own life.

I figure Mary made "*haste*" to Elizabeth to seek out the counsel of someone she could confide in. It just so happened, that that someone was a member of her family.

Undoubtedly, Mary had great respect for Elizabeth. The scripture shares that Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah were "*upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations without blame.*" Mary knew Elizabeth was a woman of deep faith and so she sought her out.

It's neat that that sort of thing took place in family. I hope you have that sort of person in your own family, one with whom you can talk, one in whom you can confide.

It could be that you're that person for someone in your family. If you're not, then what's preventing you from being that person?

Speaking a Word of Encouragement

Let's take a moment to consider Elizabeth's place in Mary's life.

Elizabeth was not at all bashful about leaning into Mary's life. She commended Mary for her faith and encouraged her to stay at what the Lord was calling her to do.

I have benefitted down through the years from a tremendous amount of encouragement from family. Anything my mom says is golden. Cheryl's mom and dad seemed to always be there with just the right words.

Life is not at all easy and the encouragement of family can go a long way toward helping us get through its rough patches.

It might be that that sort of encouragement is not there when it comes to family.

- Maybe there is some fence mending that needs to go on.
- Maybe there are some conversations that need to happen.
- Maybe there is some counseling that needs to take place.

Like Mary, let's make our way to family this Christmas, as tough as that might be for you. Let's do this thing together. God would want it no other way.

Christmas outside the Box

We have been going to this box the Sundays of Advent to remind ourselves about doing Christmas outside the box.

- The first Sunday we talked about **community** and how we need to roll up our sleeves and get to work when it comes to getting involved in the community. How have you done in that regard? What things have you been doing?
- A couple of Sundays ago Ashlee encouraged us to set aside time to develop **relationships**. There are person all around us with whom we need to strike up relationships, all with an interest of sharing the good news about Jesus. This pocket watch symbolizes the right use of time when it comes to developing and maintaining relationships.
- Last week we talked about getting rid of all the distractions and putting our focus on the Lord. **Worshipping the Lord** delights him to no end.
- If you remember, I pulled out my cell phone to encourage us to fight against the many distractions that stand in the way of us **worshipping the Lord** as we should. Too much screen time is just one of those distractions.

This week I pull out this red plate. Let me tell you the story of this red plate. It was a Christmas gift from some good friends of ours who, upon giving us this plate, shared about a family tradition they did during dinnertime.

Whoever had the red plate was asked to share something good that happened that day. They were also asked to share something that might have been challenging. It was a way of getting the conversation started.

The gift of this red plate was all the more meaningful given the fact that their daughter had been killed in an automobile accident a couple of years earlier and because of that their family traditions, like the having to do with this red plate, became painfully different.

You and I are drawn to family at Christmas. Let's make the most of it. Let's think outside the box when it comes to family this Christmas.

- Spend time with one another. I mean really engage with one another—share with one another, listen to one another, and respond to one another. Don't just sit there comatose in front of the TV. Don't leave it to someone else to take the first step. You take it.
- Simplify what you do so you can enjoy each other more fully.
- Express your love for one another in ways that go far beyond simply giving a gift you bought at the store.
- How about gathering everyone together to read the Christmas story or maybe, better yet to pray?
- How about joining together to do some act of service or random act of kindness?
- How about starting some new Christmas tradition?

I will leave it to you to think outside the box when it comes to doing Christmas as a family.

Have a Great Christmas

Have a great Christmas and may you **and** yours know the blessed presence of God as you celebrate the birth of his Son.

Merry Christmas!