It is widely assumed that faith and family go together hand in glove. That our religious faith guides us in the formation of our families, and that families is where religious faith is born and nurtured. Faith and family stand or fall together like love and marriage, Romeo and Juliet, peanut butter and jelly, or Forest Gump’s peas and carrots. Faith and family – an inseparable pair.

And for sure, when we read the Hebrew Bible of the Old Testament, that is what we find. Much of the Hebrew Bible focuses on one of two inter-related families: the descendents of Abraham, which included Isaac, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers; or the family of DAVID, Israel’s greatest king. Much of the law of Moses deals with family relations, including at least two, if not five of the Ten Commandments. The Psalms and Proverbs are sprinkled with nuggets of wisdom on faith and family: Psalm 133 says, how very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity. And in Proverbs 6 we read, There are six things that the Lord hates, seven that are an abomination to him: haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that hurry to run to evil, a lying witness who testifies falsely, and one who sows discord in a family.

The New Testament appears to pick up where the Old left off, as Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus, tracing his family lines back to the family of David, and through David back to Abraham’s family as well. Then we come to the sayings of Jesus. First Jesus chastises a would be disciple who asks leave to care for his parents before embarking on the way of faith. And then later in Matthew he says very pointedly that he did not come for peace, did not come to respect, much less strengthen the status quo. Jesus says I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And in another text, a messenger comes into the house where Jesus is teaching to tell him that his family is waiting for him outside. Jesus’ reply? These people, these who are following me, these are the only family I know.

For many Christians, these are among the hardest of the hard sayings of Jesus. For when Jesus says you have to sell all you have and give it to the poor, we might say, “I can’t do that, but I know I should, for I understand and accept what Jesus is demanding.” But when Jesus demands that we forsake our family, indeed, that faith will be a sword bringing division into our families, who is prepared to affirm such demands?

What then do we make of this polemic of Jesus? Was Jesus anti family? On one level, of course not – according to John, among the last words of Jesus from the cross was an appeal for John to take care of his mother. But for sure, Jesus saw the crisis of the coming kingdom of God to be so severe, that even the holy relationships of family commanded in the law were of no importance. For Jesus the call to faith and discipleship took precedence over EVERYTHING ELSE. Even family.

Jesus’ message included a biting commentary on the religious context of his day: don’t count on your bloodlines to put you right with God. Many of the controversies in which Jesus found himself were because of his critique of the religious and social order of his day – one he saw as spiritually bankrupt. And that is why Jesus, an observant Jew, called for such a revolutionary reformation of faith that even family ties were no longer respected.
From the perspective of the faith of the church, these words of Jesus, however harsh they fall on our ears, make theological sense. We believe Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life. Our relationship with Christ cements our personal identities, and shapes all other human relationships. From the perspective of faith, as hard as it is to hear, faith comes before family.

Faith and family – how then are the two related?

First of all, I think we have to acknowledge, family is not the primary symbol for the faith community of the church. We like to talk about “the church family”, and that image is a good expression of the warmth and loving care and acceptance that abounds throughout the church. But the church is not so much the “family of Christ” as we are the BODY of Christ. The church is not composed of ever descending generations of persons farther and farther removed from the founder: we are the living embodiment of a living Lord. As Paul wrote, we are many members, diverse members, members performing differing functions, but we are one organic whole, one entity, one body.

And the body of the church is not so much a family as it is a very intentional community. You have to be BORN into a family, and if you join a family by marriage or even adoption, there is a tendency to remark, “you know he is not a member by blood or birth.” That is not the way it is in the church. Even for those of us who were born into the church. The members of the church all came here as STRANGERS who through the love of Christ are transformed into FRIENDS. We are all spiritual immigrants. We have come from some other place to this place, from some other congregation to this congregation, from a life without faith into a life with faith. No one was born here. We all CAME here, and by the grace of God, we find faith here.

Faith gives us the courage to act for health and wholeness WITHIN our families. Our faith calls us to be instruments of change and vessels of peace in the world – and within our own families. The story of Joseph and his brothers read today is but one of the climactic ones in this long saga. As a family therapist might say, Joseph’s family of origin had a LOT of problems. Joseph’s great grandfather Abraham nearly killed his son Isaac in a religious ritual. Joseph’s father Jacob deceived his uncle Esau and stole his birthright. Jacob played favorites among his wives and sons – and his less favored sons returned the favor by selling the favored one into slavery.

Joseph could have retaliated against his brothers. But instead he acted, with wisdom and courage, to effect change within his family system. To break the cycle of retribution and deceit, and to lift up generosity and grace. Joseph dared to reach for wholeness and health for his family. Is that a message any of us need to hear for us and our families?

Faith is about the courage to act, to act within our families, and the courage to act ON BEHALF of our families. In a recent book entitled Family: A Christian Social Perspective, Lisa Sowle Cahill suggests that faith calls “Christian families .. to discover or create a family identity that is genuinely countercultural.” (83) Faith empowers us to work within our families to resist the messages of crass materialism, and to raise up boys and girls and men and women who dare to live by love, not hate, and who are motivated by the common good over selfish greed. Faith gives us the tools – to use the imagery of Ephesians, the ARMOR – for doing battle with the powers of darkness. Faith is the motivating power for shaping families by the values of God.

The future vitality of faith and family are inextricably linked. Faith and family ARE hand in glove. The family is the hot house of faith and faith is the guiding light for building the family. Neither will survive without the other. Earliest Christianity was a religion of hearth and home: church took place in the home. Two thousand years later, families come to church. Nurture in the faith is done by ministers and church professionals who teach the persons who teach in settings we create. But how much faith is being nurtured in the home? How many hours a week are you in church? How many hours a week is your family at home?
Here at church we have the rituals of worship and education and fellowship, the sacraments and song. What faith rituals are lived by your family at your home? Does your family share daily prayer? Is the Bible read in your home? Does your family engage in Christian reflection on current events and the moral issues of our times? Can faith long survive with so little attention? I once heard someone say “Peace is too important to leave to the professionals.” Is not FAITH too important to entrust solely to the professionals? Faith must be cultivated and nurtured and lived in the family.

Faith builds up families. Christian families are not perfect, of course. But I don’t think that old saw about “the family that prays together stays together” has yet been disproved. Faith provides a common language for dealing with the traumas and turmoils of life. Faith instills the values for resisting worldly propaganda. The world of faith is the vehicle for making your way through this world.

Faith and family belong together.

Friends: Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of God’s power. Put on the whole armor of God…For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness…Fasten the belt of truth around your waist and put on the breastplate of goodness…take up the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. AMEN.

Genesis 45:1-5, 15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 8:18-22;

Now when Jesus saw great crowds around him, he gave orders to go over to the other side. A scribe then approached and said, “Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go.” And Jesus said to him, “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.” Another of his disciples said to him, “Lord, first let me go and bury my father.” But Jesus said to him, “Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead.”

Matthew 10:32-39

Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven; but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.
Ephesians 6:10-17

10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. 11 Put on the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. 13 Therefore take up the whole armor of God, so that you may be able to withstand on that evil day, and having done everything, to stand firm. 14 Stand therefore, and fasten the belt of truth around your waist, and put on the breastplate of righteousness. 15 As shoes for your feet put on whatever will make you ready to proclaim the gospel of peace. 16 With all of these, take the shield of faith, with which you will be able to quench all the flaming arrows of the evil one. 17 Take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.