

The Other Side of the Christmas Tree

Fa-la-la-la Family

December 16, 2007

Good to see you all today – glad you’re here ... we’re in the second week of our series “The Other Side of the Christmas Tree” and we’re taking a look at aspects of the “most wonderful time of the year” that can be not-so-wonderful for a lot of us. We’re talking about things about Christmas that are sometimes kind of messy (like the other side of the tree often is) and even unpleasant. Last week we talked about the financial pressures of the holiday season and, today, as you’ve probably picked up from our video and our drama, we’re talking about *family*.

And I’m curious – how many of you over the next two weeks, from now through New Year’s Day, are going to spend some time in the company of your extended family? How many are going to be

with parents or children or siblings who you don't live with or see very often? How many of you are going to spend some time together with your in-laws or an-ex or your spouse's ex? (I'm going to rate those all about the same level!) That's not true – I have some good in-laws.

And how many of you (and you might not want to raise your hand on this one), when you think about that set of impending relational interactions, identify more with Carol in the drama than you do with the snazzy, jazzy video that came before it? How many of you, somewhere along the line, are going to have to deal with your version of Nana or Uncle Dave and you're dreading it? Again, don't raise your hands 😊.

This congregation is fairly representative of the culture at large, so my hunch is that the majority of us feel that way about at least some of the folks in our clan. And if we could figure out how

to avoid being around them this Christmas – you know, just pretend we’re not home when they show up – we would do that. But the reality of the way “family” works is that it’s almost impossible to pull that off. Unless there’s been an end-of-the-line falling out where we just break off the relationship altogether, there is no getting out of family. Even if you aren’t *physically* together, you still going to end up making a phone call on Christmas Day that has the potential to be “the next worst thing to being there.”

Now, I realize that I’m painting a pretty bleak picture and some of us would say “that’s probably going a little too far, a little too strong. I don’t feel *that* bad about what’s going to happen this Christmas with my family. I have a little bit of *apprehension* but I wouldn’t say I’m *dreading* it.”

I understand that because that’s where I’m at personally these days. As most of you know, my

wife Jetta and I are empty-nesters now and we're kind of getting used to that. But this week and next, everybody's coming home for Christmas. We're going to have a houseful, and that's going to be fun. But we're going to be throwing together a bunch of people who haven't lived under the same roof for several years and that's going to cause some tension, even though we're all crazy about each other.

Typical Tensions

And that's just one kind of tension that typically occurs among families during the holidays. It's fairly harmless because it comes and goes rather quickly, but there are also tensions that are not as benign. These have the potential to really grind people if they're not handled well. So I'm going to give you a list of seven of them that I thought of, and you could probably add to this.

As I go through this list, check off the ones you personally are facing.

1. The first one I'll call Presence Pressure.

And I don't mean pressure to buy the perfect gift. I mean pressure to be present – stress over where you're going to be and when and for how long – being in the right place at the right time.

We're starting to feel just a bit of that in our family. Our oldest daughter, Marilyn, was married two-and-a-half years ago. She married this guy named Tim and, we love Tim, he's a great guy. But he has added a twist to our Christmas celebration: we have to now work *our* family's traditions around *his* family's traditions in order to make it possible for us to see our oldest daughter, because she's off with them half of the time.

And, right now, just to be clear, that's not too

challenging, but when they have kids ... watch out! The “presence pressure” is going to go way up because, by golly, *my* grandchildren had better be rockin’ around my Christmas tree on Christmas Eve at my house! Nobody else’s house.

Just kidding. At least right now I am. 😊

The Presence Pressure ... then there’s often tension brought on by ...

2. The “Fa-la-la-la-la Family” Syndrome

You know what that is right? It’s the expectation that it’s going to be 24/7 “decking the halls and donning now our gay apparel, fa-la-la-la-la” ... in other words, that everyone will be happy and playing together nicely all the time.

For some people, it’s just ruins things if everything isn’t perfect and everyone isn’t smiling and so they feel tension over that. And

everyone else knows they're feeling tension so they feel pressure to be the "fa-la-la-la-la Family" and that causes more tension. And pretty soon with all that tension, a blow up is inevitable.

A lot of families feel tension when they're together at Christmas because of ...

3. "**Bad Blood**" Disease

– there's just bad blood flowing between people in that family. They've got unresolved disputes and misunderstandings between people. There are all kinds of unwritten, unspoken truces and temporary relational Band-Aids that will fall off with the slightest touch, spilling toxic waste all over anyone who gets in the way. You know what I'm talking about, you've been there.

In many families, there's *a lot of tension* over ...

4. The “Commandment Five Trump Card.”

You know what that is, right? It’s the Fifth of 10 Commandments. You know what the Fifth Commandment is? “Honor thy ...” Honor who? “Thy father and mother”

Here’s how that trump card gets played: “I’m still your father (or mother) even though you are 30 or 40 or even 50 years old, I can still tell you what to do...and you need to listen.” And if you’re older that can be very hard for you, especially if you are a Christian, because the Fifth Commandment doesn’t go away just because you grow up. And that causes tension from both sides of the fence.

Lots of families experience tension because of what I call...

5. The Holy Moleys

... which are issues related to spirituality: You're a Christian and other people in your family are not. You may have people in your family who are atheists or are from other faiths, and there is tension there. Maybe a snide remark here or there, or sometimes a front and center debate. Or even ridicule, "How could you believe that junk... I can't believe you give your money to that church - you're nuts." Sometimes the holy moles are when people put you on a pedestal and then make you out to be "holier than thou."

In many families, there's tension because of ...

6. The "What Elephant?" Game (not "white elephant" game, when you exchange gifts)

- The "What Elephant" is like - "There's an elephant in this room" and everyone says "What elephant?" It's when people act like the big problem that everyone knows is there isn't really a problem.

Finally, lots of families feel tension because of their ...

7. **Cousin Eddie**

Everyone has a Cousin Eddie – like the guy in *Christmas Vacation*, maybe not that bad, but there’s somebody you just don’t “get” because of a personality clash or some other difference between you and them.

Presence Pressure; the “Fa-la-la-la-la Family” Syndrome; “Bad Blood” Disease; The “Commandment Five Trump Card”; The Holy Moleys; The “What Elephant?” Game; and “Cousin Eddie” - those are just a few of the tensions coming to a family near you this Christmas. It’s enough to make you say “Bah Humbug!” and run for the border.

But the truth is, as I said earlier, you really can’t

do that. The traditions and obligations are just too strong and you can't bail. So, you've got to figure out how to deal with it.

Deal With It

And, at this point, I'm tempted to try and give you some good biblical principles for doing just that: dealing with each one of these situations.

I mean, I could say something like ...

1. "Remember that God loves Cousin Eddie, too ... and so should you."

After all, that's what Jesus said to his followers:

"My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." John 15:12 (NIV)

I could say, the best way to deal with presence pressure and the Fa-la-la-la Family Syndrome is

to work hard to ...

2. Get everyone to agree on what are reasonable expectations ahead of time.

After all, Jesus said ...

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”
Matthew 5:9 (NIV)

I could tell you, go do the work of a peacemaker and you might reduce presence pressure and the fa-la-la-la-la Family Syndrome.

3. I could even say to you, deal with “Bad Blood” Disease in your family by you being the first one to confess your guilt in any misunderstandings.

After all, Jesus told us ...

“If you are standing before the altar in the Temple, offering a sacrifice to God, and you suddenly remember

that someone has something against you, leave your sacrifice there beside the altar. Go and be reconciled to that person. Then come and offer your sacrifice to God.” Matthew 5:23-24 (NLT)

So, it's on you. You are responsible to take the first step.

I could say deal with The “Commandment Five Trump Card” by taking the commandment seriously – it's a command and not a suggestion or an option.

So you and I should...

4. Choose to treat your parents with unconditional respect because of their position (not necessarily their actions).

Kind of a different way of thinking about this. Unconditional respect.

5. I could say deal with the Holy Moleys by refusing to argue or judge.

After all, the Bible tells us to ...

Avoid foolish controversies, arguments about genealogies, quarrels, and fights about Moses' Teachings. This is useless and worthless. Titus 3:9 (GW)

It puts your emotions in a position to be manipulated and controlled by the emotions of other people and religions. Just get up and leave. Paul writes, don't even deal with divisive people. So you just get up and leave.

I could say just don't play the "What Elephant?" game. Just decide that you're not going to play it.

6. If the door is open and the time is right, then confront the issues instead of ignoring them.

After all, the Bible says that ...

If a person gets trapped by wrongdoing, those of you who are spiritual should help that person turn away from doing wrong. Do it in a gentle way. At the same time watch yourself so that you also are not tempted. Galatians 6:1 (GW)

And if I said all of these things to you, I would be giving you really good advice because a lot of times it actually works. Sometimes, it doesn't, but we all know there are no guarantees whenever real people are involved.

And if I said all of this to you, and made a big deal about all of that stuff, I might actually help you deal with the *situations* that you're going to be facing this week and next, but I probably wouldn't be helping you (or me) with the root issue that needs to be addressed before anything

else.

The Heart of the Matter

We might call it “the heart of the matter,” and I’ll explain it like this:

Several months ago, I told you that when Jetta and I and our daughters (and Tim!) went back east last summer to vacation with my parents and my sisters and their families, once again things did not end very well between me and my mom. For some reason (I think it’s our personalities - we’re very similar. We’re both hot-headed, we both know-it-all), if she and I are together for very long in that extended family setting, we seem to always wind up in a ditch over some of those tensions we just talked about.

And I don’t want you to misunderstand me: we love each other - I love my mom, she loves me. I

talked to her on the phone yesterday – everything is fine. And even after the blow-up, we both felt awful, terrible, and we apologized over the phone and everything was “OK” again ... sort of.

I say “sort of” because something happened to me, or I should say *I let something happen to me*, something not very good, something that became obvious when we went back to visit again just a few weeks ago for Thanksgiving. Here’s what happened (or didn’t happen I should say): *instead of seeking to engage my mom (or anyone else for that matter), I just put up an emotional wall.* My goal (and I didn’t realize until it was over) was to just get through it without any explosions. And, my dad was very happy about that by the way. So, I was there but I wasn’t *really* there. Any of you ever do that?

Now, to be fair, sometimes that might actually be the best strategy in a situation like that because,

after all, the Bible does tell us in Romans chapter 12 ...

*If it is possible, as far as it depends
on you, live at peace with everyone.
Romans 12:18 (NIV)*

And sometimes “living at peace” means just doing whatever it takes to keep the war from starting in the first place.

But I think that strategy can also be a cop out. It was for me. See the truth is that I didn't want to take the risk of investing my emotional energy and coming up empty-handed. *My heart just wasn't in it and so I didn't even try.* And that friends, is a much bigger problem than trying to figure out how to deal with a specific relational tension in your family.

Why? Because when our hearts give up they go numb and they grow hard, and we begin to

divorce ourselves from people and relationships.

In fact, in speaking about divorce of the marital kind, Jesus named the death of the heart as the root issue. Someone asked him, “So, if divorce is so bad, why does the Law of Moses make provision for it?”

The Bible says that ...

Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

Matthew 19:8 (NIV)

In other words, it was never God’s intention that a husband and wife would end their relationship in divorce. But, in a sinful world, people’s hearts sometimes grow hard and so God in his grace, Jesus said, made provision for such a tragic ending.

So, the real issue is not “how do we deal with the tensions that are certain to arise, but how do we keep our hearts from growing cold and hard when those tensions inevitably do?” Because if you don’t deal with that issue first, here’s what’s going to happen: you’re going to look through that list of tensions that we just went through a minute ago, and you’re going to look at some of those strategies that we went through after that, and you’re going to pick them and match them up, and you’re going to give it a go. And you know what? When it fails, as it will fail, you’re going to get discouraged and quit because you don’t have the strength of heart to do those things again and again and again and again, seventy times seven (Jesus talked about forgiving people), which that’s what it takes, and you won’t have the strength to do it.

That’s what happens in marriages. That’s why marriages fail, because people try to fix the situation (which is usually code for “everything

my spouse is doing wrong”) without dealing with their own hard-heartedness *first*.

By the way, when I planned this message, I wasn't intending to speak about marriage but it just turned out that way. Maybe some of you needed to hear that, so if the shoe fits ...

So, again, question is, what can we do about our hearts as we go into this holiday season and we get into this tension that is associated with our family? Two things, I think are very important. And I feel very unqualified to say these things to you because I blew it over Thanksgiving, big-time. I can give you a dozen reasons why, but I did not do what I am about to tell you that you should do, and I regret that - mostly because I was wrong and I offended God and my parents, but also because my parents are probably going to watch this message over the web and they're going to finally understand why I was such a jerk - a pleasant and peaceful jerk to be sure, but a

jerk. (Hi Mom. Hi Dad. Say hello to everybody here this morning.)

Anyway ... what should I have done about my heart before Thanksgiving? What should you and I do about our hearts now, as we're going into this season of Christmas? I could tell you the answer to that in a sentence or two – and I will in a just a minute – but I think you'll see this better if I illustrate it first.

You remember the story about Jesus being born, right? I mean, you know, it is Christmas time and we kind of think about that. Let me read you what the Gospel of Matthew says about the way this whole thing started. Matthew writes ...

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.

Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins."

Now here's the important part:

*When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. Matthew
1:18-24 (NIV)*

Ok, now I want you to keep that phrase in your mind, "he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him." Keep that phrase and that

image in mind as we flip over to Luke and hear what Luke writes about Mary and what was going on with her at about the same time and a little bit before that. Verse 26 of chapter one, Luke says ...

God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For nothing is impossible with God."

Now, here's the important part – at least for our purposes this morning:

Mary says...

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Luke 1:26-27, 30-36,38 (NIV)

Now, I want you to keep that whole thing on in your mind, that picture. Here's what I want you to see. In that day and age, a woman who was pregnant out of wedlock was about the most shameful thing you could imagine, second only to a man choosing to *marry* a woman who was pregnant out of wedlock with a child that wasn't

even his! I mean if there was ever a family that was facing tension at Christmas time, these two, the original Christmas Family, certainly experienced it. And they survived it, without becoming bitter and hard-hearted.

How did they do that? Remember what Mary said...

"I am the Lord's servant," "May it be to me as you have said."

Luke 1:38 (NIV)

Translation: "I get it. It's not about me. I'm not serving myself. I'm not even serving this culture of honor and shame. I am the *Lord's* servant. And I can do whatever I need to do in this difficult situation. May it be to me as you have said. Bring it on."

Now flip over to Joseph.

After he heard the same story, he ...

... did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

Matthew 1:18-24 (NIV)

Why? Why would a guy in the most dishonorable, shameful situation that you could imagine, say “Yep. Okay.” Because he decided: “it’s not about me. I’m not here to serve myself. I’m not here to serve this culture of honor and shame. I am the *Lord’s* servant. And, even though the situation is challenging, I’m going to do what he commands me to do. Bring it on.”

And, I don’t know about you, but I am so glad these two put their hearts in that position of submission to God and to each other and to the child who would be born and, in fact, to you and me, because when that child was born, as you know, he grew up and taught us what it means to live in the Kingdom of God. And he made it possible for us to live in that Kingdom even after

we die, through his death and resurrection.

But that's kind of beside the point. The point is ... for you and I to keep our hearts from becoming hardened by all this tension that surrounds the holiday and our families ...

1. We've got to decide what they did. We have to decide in advance that "this season is not about me. "I am the Lord's servant." It's about serving God by loving people."

It's not about me. This Christmas is not about me. Thanksgiving should not have been about me. That statement, that attitude has to become the desire, the longing, the foundation, the core of your heart. In fact, you might even want to take that statement and write it on a 3x5 card and tape it by your mirror for the next two weeks just to remind and encourage your heart to lean in that direction. You know I'm going to do it. I hope you'll do it with me. Just write that statement down.

Of course, some might say, “that’s really cool, but what do you mean by ‘serving God by loving people?’” And, we came across this little thing, you’ve probably seen on the internet, and it’s kind of a way of visualizing this. It’s based on First Corinthians 13, which is in the Bible (the “love chapter”), everybody reads it at a wedding you know, and then they don’t do it. 😊 But, Paul is writing about “here’s how love works,” and somebody has kind of tweaked this to make it fit with Christmas. It says...

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies and preparing gourmet meals, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, sing carols at the nursing home, and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the husband.

Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens.

Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return, but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love

never fails. (That part is right out of the Bible.)

Where there are video games, they will break. Pearl necklaces will be lost and golf clubs will rust ... but the gift of love will endure.

Now, that's a little bit of Christmas sap, on the edge for me personally, but it captures the idea. It's not about me. It's not about you. Christmas can be about serving God by loving people.

Of course, the thing about that kind of decision, if you make that, is that it doesn't stick very easily. The world, our flesh and the devil are constantly saying the exact opposite to us 24/7: "*it is about you. You are the most important being; your happiness is the most important goal.* So demand that Christmas be done your way, according to your will. Control, manipulate, beg, whine, plead, sulk, explode – do whatever it

takes, because that is what is going to make you happy.” Jesus said otherwise, by the way, he said “If you lose your life, that’s when you gain your life.”

But the point is, making a decision today, and even writing it on a card that reminds you daily, isn’t going to be that effective. What *will* be effective is what Jesus said.

“I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who live in me while I live in them will produce a lot of fruit. (This good stuff is going to come out of your life.) But you can't produce anything without me.”

John 15:5 (GW)

What’s he saying?

2. You have to keep your hearts connected to me (Jesus).

We’ve got to keep our hearts connected to Jesus

if we don't want them to get hard. We've got to keep our hearts connected to Jesus if we're going to get the "it's not about me, it's about serving God by loving people" attitude to take root in us. Then we've got to regularly and continually go to God for that kind of strength. We've got to call a time out every day to center our thoughts on Jesus. And, frankly, this is why a lot of people mess up. They have really good intentions on Sunday and they come and hear a message, or they hear a song or hear a scripture and they go "Ah, I got it," and then they go out of here and they never connect with Jesus out of here. They don't follow through and then they can't understand. You've got to stay connected to Jesus.

So, here's an experiment to try: over the next 10 days, take five minutes a day to find a quiet place, turn off the tv, shut down the laptop, do whatever you need to do and just focus on Jesus just for five minutes, and ask him to give you the

strength you need, ask him to change your heart so that it doesn't grow hard.

And to start off the week right, since we're on the home stretch to Christmas, that's how we're going to close our service. We're going to take five minutes to do this. I'm going to ask the band to come up right now and lead us in a Christmas carol at the end that expresses that desire for Jesus to give us strength and power. You've heard this carol before, but you've probably never thought of it this way.

Reflection Time

I'm going to lead you through some thoughts, so you might want to close your eyes and concentrate, focus, whatever you need to do to tune things out. And I'm going to just ask you some questions and we'll just have some silence for a minute....

When you think about this week and next week, is it the... Presence Pressure issue?; the “Fa-la-la-la Family” Syndrome?; “Bad Blood” Disease; Will the “Commandment Five Trump Card” be played?; The Holy Moleys getting you down?; The “What Elephant?” Game; or dealing with “Cousin Eddie”. Which one of these is the big issue? Just take that and hold it up to God and tell Him “This is what concerns me.”

Now, set that aside and look inward. Is your heart hard or soft toward the people who are going to cause that issue in your life? And if you’re heart is hard, are you ready to admit that and say “I’m just not where I need to be.”

And even if it’s not hard, are you willing to say “I really need to embrace this thought that this season is not about me. It’s about serving you Jesus by loving these people in some way – by getting a soft heart toward them.”

ENDNOTES