Sunday, December 9, 1984
GOD'S FAMILY
Matthew 12:46-50; I John 4:7-12,19-21

The word "family" has a number of meanings and is used in a variety of ways. We can speak of the human family in describing all the people who live on this earth, or God's family. In times past, the term "family" usually meant what we today call the extended family — father, mother, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles, nieces and nephews. In some cultures, still today, the word "family" is synonymous with clan or tribe.

Biblical scholars tell us that in the Bible the term "family" usually included four generations, which are covenanted to each other. It is clear that the actions of one generation had continuing impact upon those who came after them.

In addition, both the Old and New testaments of the Bible are filled with family images and teaching are filled with family images and teaching about the family. God is frequently depicted as a wise and loving parent, more often as a father, but with maternal images as well. The people of God are to live as loving children of God and to care to each other as brothers and sisters. All the people of the earth are described as "God's Family," not just the Jews or the Christians. The Gospel of John reminds us that "God so loved the world that God gave his only Son."

It is for these reasons that this Advent Season we are doing series of sermons on the family, and what it means to be a part of God's family from a Christian point of view.

Most of us begin to experience what it means to be a part of God's family be being a member of a smaller family, in our times frequently called the nuclear family. For the most part, we grew up in households with one or two parents, either natural parents or step-parents or those who adopted us. Some individuals grow up in homes of grandparents, or aunts and uncles. Whatever the makeup of the household, this is our basic family unit.

WE don't know very much about the early family life of Jesus. The Gospel of Luke tells us about his birth in Bethlehem, and gives us the names of his parents — Joseph and Mary. We are also told that John the Baptist, born several months earlier, is his cousin.

WE are given more information about his family background in the Gospel of Matthew, as this gospel traces his genealogy back for 42 generations — all the way back to Abraham and Sarah.

We further learn from Matthew's gospel that at an early age, Joseph and Mary had to take Jesus to Egypt in order to save his life. Returning from Egypt, the family lived in Nazareth, where Joseph was a carpenter.

Jesus grew up in a home that took the family religion seriously. Luke tells us that he was circumcised when eight days old, according to Jewish law, and that Mary and Joseph followed the other religious rituals of the Jewish religion as he was growing up. Then for almost 12 years, we hear nothing in the New Testament about the boyhood of Jesus.

At the age of 12, we are told that his parents took him to Jerusalem to celebrate with them and the rest of the family, the Feast of the Passover. Then we hear nothing more until Jesus is

about 30 years old. Luke's Gospel does make one additional revealing statement about the childhood and young adulthood of Jesus — "And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and other people."

However, reading between the lines and from the nature of Jesus' ministry as an adult, and the way he treated people, particularly the outcasts of society, we can conclude some other things about his family life.

1. Jesus grew up in a loving family environment and learned from his parents and brothers and sisters of the love of God, not only God's love for him and people of his religious group, but of God's love for all people everywhere, and particularly of God's love and forgiveness for all sinners.

Jesus frequently used the image of a loving father in God and he undoubtedly would not have done this unless he had also experienced the love of his own father, Joseph.

2. Jesus learned from his childhood on up an appreciation for the religious tradition of his parents and all the way back for 42 generations to Abraham and Sarah. He learned the religious tradition and was eager to do so. He knew the law of Moses. He knew the teachings of the prophets. He learned early on from his family that religion could be a great source of strength.

3. He learned from his family life and from his religious tradition to treat all people with respect and dignity. To Jesus, each individual was a creature of God and as such a member of God's family. He learned from his immediate family to be a responsible member of God's family.

What does all of this have to say about families in our world and how in our immediate families we can also learn to better participate in God's total family?

Interestingly enough, recent research about family life has discovered that there are six qualities which are found in strong families in our time and these qualities parallel what Jesus must've found in his own family almost 2,000 years ago.

Let's look at these six qualities now in some detail because they fit in with what our Christian faith has always taught.

1. The quality that seems to be the dominant one of strong and healthy families is that of expressing appreciation to and for one another. Strong and healthy families are those that build family members up psychologically and make each other feel good about themselves. Family members give lots of praise to each other. They do not put each other down. They are supportive of each other.

2. A second quality found in all strong and healthy families is that family members do a lot of things together. They have a lot of fun together. They play together as well as work together. Strong families structure their lives so that they can spend time with each other. This time together is intentionally planned so that they are relating to one another on more than a superficial level.

3. A third quality present in strong and healthy families is that the members spend time talking with one another. In other words, they have good communication patterns. They not only talk with one another, but they listen to one another. Strong and healthy families do have conflict,

but the conflict is in the open and feelings are aired and the conflict is dealt with in a healthy fashion. It is not underhanded.

Some time ago, I came across a letter to “Dear Abby” in which the writer told about the lack of communication between her and her husband. She wrote:

“Dear Abby: Can you tell me if a wife has any legal right to know some facts about her husband? I’ve been married for several years, but I don’t know where my husband works. (He says, “Somewhere in Detroit.") I don’t know what he does, how much he makes, how much he owes, or if he has anything saved. I don’t know if he has any insurance, and if he has, who the beneficiary is. He never has any friends over. He never mentions any names. No one ever calls him at home, yet he must have some friends because he goes somewhere. If I ask any questions, his routine answer is, “Don’t worry about it.” Thank God I’ve got a good job. I make all the house payments. I also pay for improvements. He pays the utilities. I buy my clothes. He buys his. No mail comes here for him. It sounds as though he could be a criminal, doesn’t it? Well, I had the police check, and he has never been arrested for anything. He’s never paid any fines or been in jail. If someone comes to see me, he goes into the bedroom and stays there. No amount of pleading will get him out. After my guest leaves, he yells at me for opening the door. He doesn’t even want me to answer the phone. Please help me. I need some answers soon. (signed) IN THE DARK IN MICHIGAN.”

Abby replied: “Dear In: Your husband is either sick (paranoid) or he is hiding out. The chances are he is using a phony name. One thing is certain — something is very strange. First see a lawyer to determine a wife’s rights. You may have to hire a private investigator to find out why his behavior is so secretive. If you choose to live with this mysterious man, it’s your right, of course. But I am in the dark as to what you are getting out of this marriage besides abuse.”

4. A fourth quality found in strong and healthy families is that the members of the family have a high commitment to each other and to the family as whole. The family members are willing to invest time and energy in their family life. What life gets hectic, they reassess and free time for the family. They take initiative to create their family life as they want it to be.

5. A fifth quality of strong and healthy families is that they have a high degree of religious orientation. To these families, religion is a great source of strength. Strong families not only attend church together, but they also participate in activities of the church. They are committed to keeping their spiritual natures vital and alive. They know that by loving one another they are loving God, and they also know that they need to be constantly reminded of their connection to God and to one another, and to people everywhere. Good religions not only strengthen our immediate and extended family relationship, but also keeps making us aware that we are also a part of God’s larger family — the family that extends throughout all the earth, and backward and forward into history. That’s why we help feed the hungry, not only here in Lincoln, but also in Africa.

Good religion constantly reminds us that we cannot love God unless we also are loving and caring toward our brothers and sisters of the human race. As the scripture for this morning put it — "If any one says he or she loves God and hates a brother or sister, that person is a liar. For if we do not love our brothers and sisters whom we can see, how can we love God, whom we cannot see.”

6. The sixth quality found in strong and healthy families is that they are able to deal with crises in an open and positive way. The family members unite and help each other whenever any one of them needs it. They are supportive of one another.

The one theme that runs throughout all six qualities is that of caring love!

What's all this got to do with Advent and Christmas? Simply this: We are in the time of the church year when we remember the birth of Jesus — when God's love became a human being and lived among us. This love of God in a human being entered our world in the same way that all of us come into this world — as a baby and as a member of a particular family.

As a human being, Jesus first learned to experience the love of God through the love and care of his parents and other family members. Only then did his love begin to expand and grow and as an adult he could express love for all of God's family.

The same is true for us — strong and loving and caring families help us to experience the love of God in very specific and particular ways. And then too, our love will continue to grow and expand so that we come to see ourselves also as a part of God's larger family. Not only does this strengthen and help love grow throughout the world — but it also can bring strength and peace to us especially during this season. The only real hope for peace in this world is for all of us one day to see ourselves as part of one family — and for us Christians that means seeing ourselves as a part of God's family. Amen.