

# Behind Closed Doors

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Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

One of the things I love to do when I visit with people in their homes is to make myself over to the display of the family pictures. Most homes have a display of the family pictures. It's fun to see what pictures get chosen to don the mantle or the credenza of a particular family and what stories they are there to tell. Most of them are happy stories and some, not many, turn out to be sad. Invariably there is the one picture with the whole family together. Somewhere along the way a lot of families make the attempt to get everybody together – and not just everybody together, but everybody together wearing the same thing – if it's on the beach it's usually kakis and a white shirt – and not just everybody together on the beach wearing kakis and a white shirt – but everybody smiling as if this is the most wonderful experience we have ever had – getting this family picture taken. I always consider this the miracle picture. It's the miracle picture because it truly is a miracle of logistics to get twelve, fifteen, twenty, thirty people together from the four corners of the world on the same day in the same place. It truly is a miracle that the weather is cooperating enough that there is not a sandstorm swirling or a thunderstorm striking. It truly is a miracle to get them wearing the same thing. It truly is a miracle to get them smiling together at the same time at some reasonable photogenic level such that no one is utterly embarrassed to have their picture enshrined on the family wall for eternity. And what makes it most a miracle picture is the suggestion it convincingly makes that this family in this picture truly has its act together. The way we look with each other, the picture suggests, is the way we feel for each other 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 52 weeks of every year. And that, of course, would be the miracle. The truth is – the best of families are a mixed bag.

Friends of ours a couple years ago sent out a Christmas card that featured a picture of their two toddler daughters dressed in their prettiest Christmas outfits sitting with each other in a tender toddler embrace smiling the smile of cherubs. You couldn't image a more darling picture. When you turned the card over there was the picture of the same two darling girls 5 minutes later with one in tears fending off the other who is attempting to beat her with her teddy bear.

This is the truth of family, isn't it? The best of times...the worst of times.

I grew up in the days of *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver*, *My Three Sons* and *Ozzie and Harriet* and with those shows and with that time came the myth of the All-American Christian family that made you wonder was it possible that there were homes in your neighborhood where things were not going as well? Or more so – why was your home – your All-American Christian home – why was it at times not feeling All-American or All-Christian? How come the family picture on their wall – doesn't look like the family behind the walls and closed doors of our home?

It's interesting that the fairy tales we grew up with before we turned on the television set were the old European stories from centuries past like Cinderella and Snow White – that begin with dysfunctional families. Wicked step-mothers, evil step-sisters and escapes into the woods to find refuge and rescue. The old, old story writers understood that the most enduring tales are the tales that tell the truth. Perhaps the most beloved story that Jesus ever told is a story about a family falling apart – the Prodigal Son. One father, no mother and two sons at odds with each other and with their dad. The enduring tales are the tales that tell the truth.

And the truth is it's hard to be a family. It's hard to be a family. And no one gets it quite right. No one gets it quite right.

And maybe that's why we keep coming back to the Bible because the Bible isn't afraid to tell the truth when it comes to family. We've been in our journey through The Story – the Biblical story – for just 5 weeks and it has been story after story of families in crisis. The fourth chapter of Genesis has Cain and Abel and the first episode of fratricide. Abraham fathers two nations with two women.

Brothers Jacob and Esau come to blows. And Joseph and his eleven brothers implode to the point of violence and abandonment. It's hard to be family and no one gets it quite right.

I have a picture in my mind of my family. By a miracle some fifteen years ago the eight McConnell cousins were able to arrange for a joint surprise 80<sup>th</sup> birthday party for our two fathers – who were twin brothers. We assembled from the four corners of the world and were able to pull off a great little party for these two men who entered the world together 80 years before. And there we stand in this picture the cousins flanking the fathers – all dressed in our finest – didn't pull off the kaki's and white shirts – looking like the All-American Christian family. Five of the ten of us ordained pastors. On the surface, a pretty well together group.

Now there is no one who loves his family and is proud of his family more than me. But the truth in the picture were six divorces, some strained sibling relationships, mental illness, addiction, and countless mistakes and bad decisions along the way. We were and are a mixed bag filled with the burdens, the hurts, the joys, the mistakes and the love of being a family.

It's hard to be a family and no one gets it quite right. Such is the truth of the tale.

So throughout the book of Joshua we have seen the people of Israel led by Joshua – who has taken over from Moses who has died on top of Mount Nebo having not gotten quite to the Promised Land. It doesn't seem fair does it – Moses leads the people of Israel for forty years through the wilderness – does everything that God asks him to do – and he gets as close as to smell the milk and honey – but he doesn't get there. Buried on top of Mount Nebo. Joshua takes over and leads the campaign to take out the Canaanites in the land – certainly not the PG part of the story – and now Joshua pulls the people together and tells again the story. How from Abraham to the present the God of Israel made a way for them from beyond the River – that is the Jordan River – and gave them the land of promise. Now that they are ready to settle in the new land, Joshua invites them to renew their covenant with God. Now it was time to make a choice. They could choose to worship the old gods from beyond the River, or they could worship the gods of the Canaanites – or they could

worship the God of their fathers and mothers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You choose, he says, but as for me and my household we will serve the Lord.

And with those words comes the yearning of just about every healthy parent – the hope and the dream that somehow someday this household of mine will represent all that is good about God. We will serve the Lord. We will be the family that does what God wants most to be done. We will be the family that worships together and prays together and works together and plays together and has fun together and honors one another together. We will be there for each other through thick and thin, in joy and in sorrow, in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health. We will resist the forces around us that would seek to make us less than the family we want to be! We can't promise kaki's and white shirts all the time, but we shall have no other Gods than the God of Israel. And it is so right for us to lay claim to that desire and that dream, but the truth of the story is that families are filled with human beings – and human beings are filled with lots of broken pieces – and all sorts of broken things can go on behind closed doors and there is no one who knows that more than the God who sees behind those closed doors to the brokenness of our lives. And what God would yearn for more than anything is not the photo-shopped picture on our mantles as much as the mosaic of broken pieces he puts together with his grace. The mosaic of broken pieces God puts together with his grace.

As for me and my house we will serve the Lord, Joshua says – and what Jesus would add --and Jesus is the New Testament way of saying Joshua – what Jesus would add are the words, "By grace." By grace will you serve the Lord. By grace will you figure out how to hold together while the forces try to pull you apart. By grace will you learn to forgive each other. By grace will you learn to accept each other. By grace will you love each other through the disagreement, the argument, the hurt, the abuse, the mistakes, the separation. By grace God through his spirit and love pieces together the brokenness and makes a mosaic a little less polished than the studio production – but a little more true to how much the story of every family is in need of the mercy of God. Isn't that what it means to be the family of God? We gather not to figure out whose family has it more together. We gather because deep down we all know how much we need God's help.

Norman Maclean was one of two sons born to a Presbyterian minister and his wife who settled in Missoula, Montana at the turn of last century. He wrote a small memoir of his life and his family called *A River Runs Through It* – a lovely tale of two preacher’s kids trying to figure out their lives and each other. Norman grows up to become an English professor at the University of Chicago while his brother goes off to live a pretty wild life that ends up at an early and violent death. The only thing that really brings to the two boys together is the love of fly fishing that they share with their preacher father. Beyond that, two boys from the same mother and father who couldn’t be more different. In his memoir, Maclean speaks about his brother and says:

*He is my brother and an artist and when a four-and-a-half-ounce rod is in his hand he is a major artist. He doesn’t piddle around with a paint brush or take lessons to improve his short game and he won’t take money even when he must need it and he won’t run anywhere from anyone ... it is a shame I do not understand him.*

*Yet even in the loneliness of the canyon I knew there were others like me who had brothers they did not understand but wanted to help. We are probably those referred to as “our brothers’ keepers,” possessed of one on the oldest and possibly one of the most futile and certainly one of the most haunting of instincts. It will not let us go.*

Am I my brother’s keeper? It’s the first human question recorded in the Bible. And the answer of course, is yes. It is our earliest way of serving the Lord. But the truth is we struggle sometimes, many times, to know how. How do we serve the Lord with all these broken pieces? Perhaps in no other way than to place those pieces – jagged and crooked as they are – ourselves perhaps most jagged and crooked of all – to place them in the hands of grace and ask for the artist to create a creation more deeply beautiful by his design. This is, is it not, to be what we call the family of God.