

Sharing the Faith with Family Members

by Rev. Joe Cox

Eclectic? Yea, you could say that. If the members of my extended family were to each place a religious symbol on the family Christmas tree, eclectic would be one way to describe it. I would have to contribute my Luther's Seal Christmas bulb—straight from [Bronner's CHRISTmas Wonderland](#) in Frankenmuth, Michigan. Perhaps that's a bit parochial, but not necessarily strange. Surely there would be some Santa Clauses from the agnostics in the family. Perhaps envelopes of money would be donated by those whose God dresses in the color green. And no doubt I would even find a tiny pyramid and even a Native American dream catcher dangling on the tree from the New Agers in our midst. If you think the family tree would look strange—just imagine the conversations. During one Christmas the conversation turned toward the nature of salvation. Consensus was reached rather quickly that one need not be Lutheran to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. But then my uncle chimed in, "...or even Christian for that matter." To which a non-LCMS Lutheran family member readily agreed: "Well, yea right." There I was, lying on the couch; perhaps there had never before been such a prime moment to take up the question of the unique nature of the salvation offered by the Bethlehem Babe. After all, I was a seminarian; I had studied this stuff and I knew all the correct theological responses about Jesus and the salvation offered through Him alone. Promptly I sat up, placed both feet on the floor, and bolted for the next room to go get some hot apple cider. It took about a half hour to fill my cup and when I came back somebody had already slipped "It's a Wonderful Life" into the VCR. Maybe Clarence the soon-to-be-an-angel could set them straight.

It was early in Christ's ministry when he came to share the Torah with his own relatives and life-long friends in Nazareth. Though the Messiah stood before them with God's word in his hands, they couldn't see the truth. All they saw was Joseph and Mary's kid: "***Isn't this the carpenter's son?***" Eyebrows rose. "***Isn't his mother's name Mary,***" the older women sucked in a little air remembering a certain unwed teenage mother from about thirty years ago. "***...aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us?***" Family members start shifting in their seats. "***And they took offense at him.***" How Jesus' heart must've broken to look upon these people he'd known for a lifetime and see the rejection in their eyes. "***But Jesus said to them, 'Only in his hometown and in his own house is a prophet without honor'***" (Check out the whole story in [Matthew 13: 53-58](#)).

Christmas time, they say, is the time of holiday cheer and family stress. It's a paradoxical time when the line between a national holiday and a religious holy day are blurred from the lawn of the city hall to the greeter at Wal-Mart. It's a time when we look forward to family gatherings, all the while dreading spending time with the relatives. Christmas seems to be such a natural time for sharing the Gospel message of Jesus Christ with family members who don't really get "the reason for the season." But it's witnessing to those people whom you've known all your life that is oftentimes most difficult. Perhaps it is the very intensity of the relationships that makes evangelism within the family the most precarious. After all, these are the people who know you... perhaps a little too well. No matter how you strive to imitate the purity of the Christ child, they've seen you at your worst. They've seen you act foolish; would they dare listen to a sinner like you? Their rejection, even if you only experience it in their eyes, is an excruciating pain. Sometimes like the disciples, it's simply easier to run and hide oneself in a cup of hot cider than to be the cause of this year's Christmas edition of the Family Feud.

...Except we're called to more than fishing cinnamon sticks out of Grandma's snowman mugs. Paul encouraged young Timothy to not be ashamed of this message, but to suffer for it. ***"For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline"*** ([2 Timothy 2:7](#)). So we brave the rejection; we risk a little alienation because in the grand scheme of things that banquet table in paradise is going to a lot lonelier without our brother or Uncle John than the extra seat at the kiddie table could ever be.

Tips:

Invite: Perhaps one of the least threatening ways to engage a family member in the story of the Gospel is to invite them. Invite them to church, especially during the holy days. Pastors know that this is a time when the unchurched are more likely to be present and a wise pastor will tailor the worship through liturgy, song and preaching to invite the visitors into a relationship with God's Son. Christmas concerts and pageants are times when families can gather to support the kids in their singing and performing—but what a natural transition when the family gathers for dessert later that evening and discusses what a wonderful job little Suzie did playing the part of Mary. Ask Suzie to explain what she thought of the story and Mary's part.

Use those Traditions: Christmas is just one time of the year when beloved family traditions double as gateways to the story of Jesus. And the traditions don't necessarily need to be formal.

- 1) During worship in Advent the collects usually begin "Stir up O Lord..." They are sometimes called the "Pudding Prayers" because it was an old tradition to have pudding, which you "stir up" as a way to remember the prayers of the church. Jell-O Pudding Snacks are just as good as the homemade variety so with little effort, and a church bulletin or hymnal in front of you, share an Advent prayer and some pudding—nobody turns down pudding!
- 2) Christmas wouldn't be complete without a little Scrooge. Read "A Christmas Carol" to the family; talk about it. It is a redemption story that is jam-packed with Christian symbolism. There is no escaping the power of crippled Tiny Tim hoping that his fellow church-goers saw him on Christmas day so that they could be reminded of him "who made lame beggars walk and blind men see."
- 3) Traditions need not be reserved for Holidays. Even simple traditions, such as the meal prayer can become a time to share the Gospel. When friends and family are over don't skip the prayer you usually say, or shrug it off by retreating to "Come Lord Jesus..." Prayer is intimate and because of that it is scary to do in front of others—but go ahead and thank God specifically for sending His son to repair our broken relationship with Him through the cross. Point to the meal before you as a "foretaste of the feast to come" at the wedding feast of the Lamb.

Be Yourself: Face it; you can't hide from your family. They remember the time you played barber with your baby cousin; the time you played fireman with real matches and they remember that nasty foul-language blow-up you had with your parents at the Thanksgiving get-together twenty years ago. Don't pretend to be angelic; it's only appealing on babies—it's pretentious on adults. Talk about the struggles of your own faith walk honestly; admit when you don't know the answer to a legitimate question. You don't need to impress them with your piety or your pomp. On the other hand, you don't need to engage in behavior that is inappropriate in order to ***"be all things to all people"*** ([1 Corinthians 9:22](#)). Politely decline in a way that demonstrates love and self-discipline. You may have to miss Aunt Jenny's bachelorette party or seem like an old "fuddy-duddy" to your grandson; you can

do so in way that shows love and grace—they will respect that much more than a hypocritical Christian whose actions don't flow from a life worthy of Christ. And don't forget to ask forgiveness when you have wronged the relationship with a family member! This is perhaps the most powerful testimony of the forgiveness you offer them when you share Christ.

Resources:

- [Adventist Family Ministry](#). *101 Ideas for Family Evangelism*. Department of Family Ministries, Seventh Day Adventist World Headquarters. This webpage provides a list of evangelism and ministry ideas that are quite simple to implement. While this is not a Lutheran resource, most of these suggestions are generic enough cover basic Christian witness.
- [Lutheran Church Missouri Synod](#). *What about... Telling the Good News about Jesus*. Dr. Al Barry. In this brochure, Dr. Barry discusses the basics of sharing the good news, including demonstrating love and prayer preparation. He also engages the question of whether or not it's rude to share our faith with others.
- [Evangelize.com](#). *Friends and Family Evangelism*. By Jamie Morgan. This brief article lists eight basic considerations as you prepare to share Christ with your loved ones.

Conclusion:

I truly believe that there is nothing more intimidating than sharing Christ with those closest to us. It's the Nazareth Syndrome—that prophet without-honor-fear that gives us dry mouth and sweaty palms. Yes, even pastors! In the end there are only two things that matter: the Good News of Jesus Christ and your sincere, heart-felt longing to bring your parents and siblings into the promise of everlasting life in Jesus. I can't promise that they will listen, let alone receive the faith given by the Holy Spirit. To be honest, I'm still not quite sure where my own brothers stand and I sometimes question the witness I've given to them. But there is one thing I'm sure of: the mercy of God that is found only in Christ Jesus. That's comforting assurance! ***"Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."*** ([Philippians 3:13-14](#)).

Questions to Consider:

- What are the roots of the fears and discomforts I feel when considering sharing Christ with my family?
- How has the subject of Christianity affected the family in the past? How can I address painful memories with compassion and tenderness?
- How do I demonstrate the love of Christ to my family members? What can I do to convey such love in my behavior, as well as in my verbal sharing of God's Good News?
- Is my witness rooted in selfish reasons or genuine concern for that other person? What would Christ have my motivation to be?

- What would be most satisfying to me if I were to see a family member come to faith in Christ?