

December 3, 2011 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church  
1 John 4:7-11 Christmas: The Family Story by Andy McDonald

I've already heard it. It is one of those Christmas songs that carries a sentiment that has seeds of truth, and even fully mature reality for many, but not for all. You may be able to hear the tune in your head when I simply say, "It's the most wonderful time of the year!"

Well yes and no!

And whether it is a yes or a no often has to do with the relationships and the joy and sorrow, hope and despair, realistic and unrealistic expectations all connected with this thing we call family.

If you just finished having a glorious Thanksgiving time with your family you may be now already building expectations of a great Christmas.

But if you barely got through Thanksgiving because time with family was so painful then already you have the dreads of more of the same at Christmas.

If life in general is good,  
If we are love  
If we have a solid family base with our 2.3 children  
If the bills are being paid  
If food is plentiful  
If there are sufficient discretionary resources for gift giving

Then it isn't hard to sing, "It's the hap happiest season of all."

The ironic reality is that for so many it isn't that happy.  
That's not to say there aren't moments of joy or happiness but for many their pain, their suffering is only accentuated by the season.

I can quickly, easily think of 4 ways family can mess up this season of joy.

The first is very tragic, it is death. Families will loose to death someone they love during this Christmas season, and their suffering this loss will be heightened because of the contrast to all the carols of Christmas joy and all the well wishers who will unintentionally increase their pain with a simple heartfelt "Merry Christmas." Mom, Dad, Grandma, Grandpa, sibling, child aren't trying to mess up the holiday! Ddeath just happens and sometimes it happens during the holidays and that's tough.

Even when the death of one we love happened earlier in the year it adds pain to our "First" Christmas without that person, or maybe it was years and years ago but Christmas causes us to remember what we are missing. That relationship is on hold. So death erodes Christmas joy.

There will be families who receive a devastating diagnosis of disease this week and no matter how we may sing, "Be of good cheer" that won't be the patient nor their family's holiday experience. Across the street in doctor's offices and by bedsides tough news will continue to be delivered even though it is Christmas season and that dampens our holiday joy.

The devastation that comes to a family when it breaks up, when mom and dad divorce effects the family immediately and for years and years afterward effect the joy of the Christmas season as schedules are juggled. It is tough to get it all in during this season and now instead of one family there are two to contend with, and there is pain and there are complications.

And of course there's the fourth way family can create stress during the holidays they can drop-in!! As if life wasn't full enough with all the holiday events, and decorating, and programs to attend and now here come the relatives!!

Whenever I think about family dropping in my mind rushes to Chevy Chase Christmas when his cousins pull up in the drive way in this horribly dilapidated motor home with expectations that their unruly kids can stay in the house while mom and dad will stay in the motorhome for the whole holiday season!!

Ben Franklin said that Fish and Visitors stink after three days but with family sometimes we aren't sure if it even takes three days—which is trouble when they are measuring their intended stay not in days but weeks.

Yes, if all is well in our life or even pretty well it can be “the most wonderful time of the year.” And if there are difficulties, especially family challenges of death, disease, divorce or just dropping in, well the Christmas season simply amplifies everything.

When we think about our families and the family story we aren't hard pressed to recognize from the Bible that messy family is the story of family.

If we begin reading the Bible we only have to go into it three chapters and we find the story of Cain and Able. They were the first “new generation” and their brotherly conduct ends with Able dead and Cain cursed.

Adam and Eve lost both boys. Those early annual celebrations whatever they were lost joy and accentuated pain each time they gathered around the table and their oldest two children weren't there.

If we read a few more chapters we find the rivalry between Noah's sons, and then Jacob steals Esau's blessing, and then 10 of Jacob's son's sell their brother Joseph. I don't know what season those brother brought home that bloody coat of many colors—but I do know that every year at that time Jacob remembered the loss. At every family gathering the atmosphere was clouded with the absence of Joseph.

David's son's war with each other. The Bible is full of family tragedy.

Jesus too suffered the pains of not being accepted or at least not being understood by his family.

In scripture when we read about Jesus' brothers and how he was treated by them many commentators agree with the idea that these must have been older brothers from a previous marriage of Joseph's. In that culture there was a good deal of deference to the oldest son in a family. And if these had been younger brothers their behavior towards Jesus would have been hard to imagine.

There's a great story tucked in scripture. The gospel of Mark best sets the stage of the story. If you have your Bible you may want to turn to Mark, There's Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, this is Mark the third chapter and we'll pick it up at vs. 20

“Then Jesus entered a house, and again a crowd gathered, (writing that word “again” is saying that this wasn't the first time—maybe even that this was becoming the standard challenge) and again a crowd gathered, so that he and the disciples were not even able to eat. When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’”

Talk about family not understanding and making things worse—they thought Jesus was crazy. Later in his ministry they taunt Jesus to not hide out in remote places, if he plans to make something of himself in this hole ministry thing he needs to press the flesh and show up at the feasts and do some campaigning.

In the book *The Desire of Ages* on the life of Christ, the author Ellen White writes about Jesus' family's actions. “”They freely condemned that which they could not understand. Their reproaches probed Him to the quick, and His soul was wearied and distressed. They avowed faith in God, and thought they were vindicating God, when God was with them in the flesh, and they knew Him not. These things made His path a

thorny one to travel. So pained was Christ by the misapprehension in His own home that it was a relief to Him to go where it did not exist.”

It is then suggested that Mary, Martha and Lazarus’ home was a safe haven but there were many times when the only relief Jesus could find was time alone with his heavenly Father.

We don’t often give it much thought but in the Jewish culture of the day there were numbers of significant annual feasts. Times when family would come together to celebrate the acts of God on behalf of their nation. And each of these family intense times were made more stressful, even for Jesus, because of the family dynamics.

And today Jesus knows that much of the pain that can come, even during joyous holidays, may not be malicious, or planned, or even aimed at us. People just die, they get diseases, they drift in opposite directions and end up divorcing, and sometimes they don’t know where else to go so they drop in Right During the Holidays!

This week I listened to one of you acknowledge that even at the opposite end of the calendar than Christmas, that being without family in this place of so much family is the source of some pain each time you come to worship here.

This week I listened to one of you speaking with dread of all the family obligations and opportunities the season affords for dredging up old family wounds or actively creating some new ones.

This week I listened to stories of strained family relations that won’t be made better by this Christmas season but likely the wounds will only be rubbed more raw.

So what do we do? To what does our faith call us as followers of Jesus? In this season of celebrating his birth how are we his followers to react when it comes to family relations?

First Jesus said something we've named the golden rule—"Do unto others what you would have them do to you."

In Stephen Covey's book, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People" he names a habit of Jesus reflected in the golden rule.

Covey labels it "Empathic Listening" but then he names it in a way that puts legs on it—Seek first to understand before you seek to be understood."

Just think of all the Christmas family challenges and then imagine that everyone came together at grandma's house for Christmas and each one came ready to practice this version of the golden rule; each one came seeking first to understand before they worried about seeking to be understood.

Too often when we get together and another person speaks we are not listening to them at the optimum level. Covey suggests we usually listen at one of four listening levels.

The first level is not really listening it is the ignoring level.

Second is where we pretend to listen responding with "Yeah. Uh-huh. Right, but we aren't really listening.

Third we may practice selective listening where we only hear certain parts of the conversation, sort of like we might do with the incessant chatter of a preschooler. Or we may practice attentive listening paying attention and focusing energy on the words that are being said so we can formulate our response or our come back.

But it is all too rare that we practice what Covey calls Empathic Listening where I really seek to understand, I mean really understand and even check to make sure I understand correctly prior to seeking to get my point across and be understood!

So our first strategy for handling family during this Christmas season is a new spin on the Golden Rule—seek to understand before you seek to be understood. Set aside all our preconceived ideas about the family

members with whom you will gather. Don't go there to try and convince, or change, or challenge, but go to understand!!

The second strategy is to stay in what I call the solving circle. In the relationship of a couple I invite them to imagine a circle like you might draw with a stick on the ground. As long as any two relatively healthy humans agree to stay in the solving circle that very agreement works toward the solving of problems. Part of the whole marriage vows and legalizing of the union between two people is to formalize their partnership and the entering of a commitment to stay in the solving circle till death do us part." When one party steps out of the solving circle and demands their own way, and even accuses those still in the circle of having pushed them out, or they refuse to talk, or won't consider any options at any valid compromise in bringing resolution, what that person is saying is that I am more important to me than we are to me. I trump us. In a family of only two I remind couples to switch their pronouns from I ME MINE to US WE and OUR!

As parts of families we can't maintain the unity that family is meant to be and then step away from the family solving circle to "do our own thing" when that is our reality we or any family member is saying I am more important, more significant, than our family.

Now remember the solving circle doesn't demand agreement just conversation, just as Ephesians says "speaking the truth in love."

Jesus didn't avoid hard truth, he didn't compromise, but he kept the conversation going always loving and always truthful. So this isn't easy but as we bump into family and we seek to understand before we seek to be understood and then agree that we are family and that even when we disagree we will not jump out of the solving circle that we want to keep the conversation alive, even speaking hard truth in love.

Our third strategy after seeking first to understand and then committing to staying in the solving circle speaking the truth in love to one another, the third strategy is to name the elephant in the room.

When families get together we have history—there are stories that are hinted at but we don't tell the whole story because we know it would blow up, but we throw conversational hints at the story and long time family members know what is being said in what is not being said, while a new person to the family is clueless.

Sometimes there are family member's choices, or business dealings with one another, or inheritance issues, or who wasn't invited, or that thing that happened a long time ago but never resolved---and these and a thousand other unnamed elephants in the room can increase the stress at a family gathering.

And when the elephants go unnamed Christmas can be more unbearable. But it is amazing what can happen when committed to understanding others, and when we are committed to not running from the solving circle we bravely name the elephant in the room.

We can always at least name the side of the elephant we see. Say there's the elephant in the room atmosphere where it seems unsafe or where one might be afraid to speak their opinion.

It is remarkable how much tension is sucked from the room when one person in vulnerability says, "I'm terrified to share my opinion. It scares me how others will react to what I might say with which they might disagree, but although I'm nervous about this I'm also tired of the restrained silence so I want to talk."

Often others will join the conversation once whatever is holding it back has been named. Over and over in Jesus ministry he would name the elephant. I love the one he does recorded in Mark 2. It's the story of some friends bringing a paralytic to be hopefully healed by Jesus. They arrive at the house and the crowds spill out of the house, people are standing by open windows listening and there's no way to get their friend in front of Jesus so he can be healed. So they go to the roof of house disassemble it until there's a big enough hole to let the paralytic

down in front of Jesus! They brought the guy to be healed but when Jesus saw him he looked beyond his felt need to his real need and said to him, "Son, your sins are forgiven." **6** Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, **7** "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"**8** Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, (He knew the elephant in the room) and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things?**9**Which is easier: to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'?**10**But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins . . ." He said to the paralytic, **11**"I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home."**12** He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all.

Listen this Christmas season you have the chance for some new family stories. No matter how together your family is or messed up they are—how painful or pleasurable—Christmas can be better if you seek first to understand, commit to continuing the conversation, and to lovingly name elephants in the room.

One more word. It is for all those who need a family or a better family or more family. There is one BIG HUGE Global family called the Body of Christ. At the risk of hokiness I'm reminded of the lines from the Gaither song that says, "You may notice we say brother and sister round here, its because we're a family and these folks are so dear."

Regardless of our biological family when we receive Christ as our savior, when we admit that our sin and our sins have separated us from God and that we can't get back into connection on our own, and when we accept the free gift of forgiveness and reconciliation with God through Jesus we are part of His family and brothers and sister to every other follower of Jesus. And in that body we need also to seek to first understand, commit to continued conversation, and to lovingly name elephants in the room and then maybe we can enjoy more and more our eternal family story.