

Preaching on Christian Family Sunday

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Recently, a national insurance company requested that 1200 randomly selected adults define the word “family.” Surprisingly, only a small number, 22 percent, opted for the traditional definition, “a group of people related by blood, marriage, or adoption.” A much larger percentage, nearly three quarters, chose a much broader definition, “a group of people who love and care for each other.”¹

Clearly, the American definition of what constitutes a family has altered drastically in the past decade, and just as clearly, the change poses challenges for the preacher who would preach a faithful and relevant word to his or her congregation on Christian Family Sunday.

Christian Family Sunday, as an entry on the church calendar, is not without its tidbit of controversy, elbowing its way onto the schedule at the expense of Mother’s Day. As William Sloane Coffin said in introducing a Mother’s Day sermon, “Just as ‘I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas’ aspires to the status of a Christmas carol—that is, to be considered on a par with ‘Lo, How a Rose’ and ‘Joy to the World’—so Mother’s Day clamors for religious recognition, to be hailed as an official day on the church calendar. A brave preacher might try to buck the tide, turning perhaps to Philip Wylie: ‘Megaloid mom-worship has gotten completely out of hand.’ A brave preacher might even have fun reminding his or her congregation that ‘I want a girl just like the girl that married dear old Dad’ is but one of the more naive expressions of the Oedipus complex. But a smart preacher will go with the flow, turning to the old Jewish proverb: ‘God could not be everywhere, and therefore he made mothers.’ On this Mother’s Day I have chosen to be smart.”²

Perhaps the avenue that Coffin chose on at least that one occasion, preaching a moving sermon on the relationship between Mary and Jesus, is the way to go every now and then.

On the other hand, a broader treatment of family issues in the context of congregational worship would certainly gain a more eager hearing than the saccharine, sentimentalized orations which Mother’s Day sermons are sometimes wont to be. “Husband, wives, children are not getting enough family life. Nobody is. People are hurting,” says Arlie Hochschild, author of the book, *The Second Shift*. The divorce rate has doubled since 1965, and it is projected that one half of all marriages made today will end in divorce. Six out of ten second marriages will likely end in divorce. One of every four children today is being reared by a single parent.³

Most people, and that includes those who sit in pews on Sunday morning, are reeling from the shock of what is happening in our culture. Moms and dads are pulled this way and that between family and career obligations. That is assuming that there is a mom and a dad. In unprecedented numbers, our

families no longer resemble the 1950's *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best* configuration. We now have single parents, second marriages which meld persons from different backgrounds into a family unit, childless couples, unmarried couples with and without children, persons who live singly because of the death of a spouse, divorce, or by choice.

Before noon, one day not so long ago, I had handed over Kleenex to a mother whose tears still flow when she speaks of the death of her son by means of AIDS, talked on the phone with a single person seeking affordable housing in the neighborhood where the church is located, consulted with the local battered women's program as I followed up on an incident of family violence about which I had become aware, and opened my office door to discover one of our church school teachers, an attractive, energetic insurance agent and mother of three preschoolers, who had been driving around all morning trying to decide whether or not to separate from her husband.

This wasn't a particularly unusual morning for me, or for any pastor. Family issues are crying for a faithful word from the pulpit, yet, the situation is so mind-boggling and so frightening that the preacher is often fearful to address it.

Perhaps one of the reasons that we as preachers are so afraid to preach on family issues is because our private lives are exposed here as they rarely are in other areas. When we preach about families, we are acutely aware that the congregation knows that our eight-year-old was the ring leader in banging on the piano during coffee hour last Sunday or that our teenager is in a drug treatment program; they can probably make a good guess at how we're getting along with our spouse at the moment. And even if the congregation doesn't know, we know deep within ourselves that the bickering at the breakfast table and pain of alienation we experience because we and our spouses are running in different directions and too busy for one another, mark a far cry from the well-scrubbed smiling family coated with the veneer of respectability seated there on the fourth pew from the front.

When we're tempted to avoid preaching on family issues, the words of the seventeenth century English clergyman Thomas Fuller are a comfort, "He that has no fools, knaves, or beggars in his family was begot by a flash of lightning." When we hesitate to preach on family issues because of our desire to present a perfect picture of our own family and a fear that our own goodness will be found lacking, are we not attempting to be justified by our own works? On the other hand, when we dare to preach on family issues, we say that, indeed, we are family members ourselves, troubled by the same pains which rankle those to whom we preach, and God has a word to say to all of us, together.

Once then we have determined to preach, what do we say? How do we proclaim God's word of grace and truth to such a divergent group, each of whom lives in an arrangement called "family?" How do we understand Christian family living in the 1990s?

John Patton and Brian H. Childs in their book, *Christian Marriage and Family: Caring for Our Generations*, suggest that we adopt an understanding of Christian family living to mean relating seriously and caringly to persons in the generation of one's parents, to those in one's own generation, and to the

generations of children and grandchildren which carry the family into the future. Although the book is written from the perspective of pastoral counseling, the understanding has merit for preachers as well.⁴

Drawing upon this understanding, preachers are enabled to speak to the many configurations of family represented in the congregation on Sunday morning. Through this definition, the preacher is freed from the constriction of speaking toward a particular form of the family, that is, the "traditional family," a norm into which few families fit these days. Patton's and Childs' definition can apply to persons who are single, divorced, blended families, single parents; it can help them move from venerating something that is now past and assist them in dealing with what is happening right now.

The preacher might consider bringing this understanding to bear upon the Gospel reading for the fifth Sunday after Easter (Christian Family Sunday in 1990), John 14:1-14. In taking a sermonic leap that is admittedly more imaginative than exegetical, one might speak of various rooms for various generations and the ways in which we come to know God as we care for one another across the generations.

In preaching such a sermon, the preacher might draw on the insights of anthropologist Mary Catherine Bateson who insists that it is not old-fashioned to think about parenting and concern for children as a central ethical issue, even for those who do not have children themselves, "In this period of history . . . all of us who . . . want to be responsible to the future need to be sure that we have a relationship with at least one real, flesh and blood child. People need not give birth to children to be in touch with them. When they decide they are not going to have children, or when their children are grown, they ought not to cut themselves off from children altogether."⁵

Similar insights might inform a sermon based on the epistle lesson for the day, I Peter 2:2-10. When one speaks of building a "spiritual house," and laying "cornerstones, chosen and precious," there is a natural movement from the biblical image of the church as a household to elucidating the ways in which the church as Christ's body makes caring for one another across generational lines possible, and even mandated by Christ. A "spiritual house" is in the process of being built when a seventy-five-year-old elder stands with a couple presenting their three-month-old for baptism, when a three-year-old child of a recently divorced family runs up and grabs a hug from the middle-aged executive, when a teenager spends the good part of an afternoon at a nursing home chatting with a fellow church member generations older than he.

Christian families, whatever their form, are very much like other families, feeling at times like George Burns when he observed, "Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family, in another city." As J. C. Wynn has pointed out, "Christians in families are also secular. We are affected quickly and deeply by our society. We enjoy good food and drink, good times and friends, joy and comfort, security and encouragement."⁶

Yet despite what we share with other families in the culture, the gospel which is preached on Christian Family Sunday, and other Sundays as well, must make clear that there is a distinctiveness about families which ground their faith and being in Jesus Christ.

Christian families are those which give attention to growing in faith. From the day that the baptismal waters dribbles down the forehead of a baby in a Christian family, there is the conviction, both spoken and unspoken, that Jesus Christ is Lord over all of life and that faith touches every compartment of life.

Horace Bushnell is reported to have said that the influence of the family is so strong that we never quite get the smell of our childhood home out of our clothes. Those who grow up in distinctively Christian homes know that being a Christian means more than uttering, "God is great. God is good." at meals; faith touches decisions about whether to accept the transfer to Tacoma, how misunderstandings and arguments are ironed out, who does the dishes when "it's not my turn."

Furthermore, homes and families are Christian because they are places of forgiveness.

When I was sixteen, newly minted driver's license in hand, I pulled the family station wagon out of the driveway to drive the entire two hundred yards from our home to the office of our farm. While I was in the office, a downpour sloshed gallons of rain down on the South Carolina terrain, justifying (to me at least) my decision to drive instead of walk. Anchoring a newspaper atop my head to keep the raindrops from ruining my new permanent, I ran to the car, keys in hand.

I rammed the key in the ignition, flipped it to start the engine, and shifted into reverse. When I started to back up, I was treated to the sickening sound of metal on metal. While I had been indoors, a fertilizer salesman had pulled his pickup truck behind the car, and in my haste and lack of experience, I had neglected to check the rearview mirror.

I did what all responsible sixteen-year-olds should do: I drove home, told my mother what I'd done, went into the bedroom, pulled the bedspread over my head, and cried. "Now I've done it," I thought, "I'll never be allowed to drive again."

But do you know, not a word was ever said to me by my parents in anger or finger-shaking accusation. When I finally ventured out of my room, I was simply told, "We've taken care of it."

Christian families convey the grace of God through the ways in which they forgive one another. Families are places where we can be ourselves, sometimes our pretty unlovable selves, and be accepted, no matter what.

When I wrecked the family car and was told, "We've taken care of it," I knew that I was experiencing God's love, as well as my parents'. Through what they showed me on that occasion, and on many others, I came to know redemptive love, the kind of love and forgiveness that families of all shapes, sizes, and forms can share within their own ranks and across the generations, the kind of love that can be preached on Christian Family Sunday.

NOTES

¹ *Newsweek*, Winter-Spring 1990, 38.

² William Sloan Coffin, *Living the Truth in a World of Illusions* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1985), 75.

³ *Newsweek*, 16-17.

⁴ John Patton and Brian H. Childs, *Christian Marriage and Family Caring for Our Generations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988).

⁵ Quoted in Patton and Childs, 91.

⁶ J. C. Wynn, "Calling a Family 'Christian,'" *Christian Ministry*, May 1985, 31.