

Preaching and the Family Paradigm

Peggy Way

Vanderbilt Divinity School, Nashville, Tennessee

Introduction

The preaching task of interpreting human existence in the light of Scripture and inviting persons to live out of such illumination is nowhere more promising than in relation to family life.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann states the centrality of the family as a powerful learning paradigm for all human beings: the family is the primary unit of meaning which shapes and defines reality.¹ Throughout human history, the worlds of story telling and of literature have disclosed those familiar and yet frightening complex worlds of family relationships where persons learn the very nature of love, hate, remorse, reconciliation, power and promise. No wonder that our faith centers around images and metaphors of family which make direct connection with these primary human experiencings, and promise fulfillment as the household of God, or *oikoumene*, the whole inhabited world as one family.

Thus it should come as no surprise that preaching on family life intersects with rich veins of response, touching immediately into the differing empirics of personal pilgrimages, the touchy pluralisms within each parish, denomination and ecumenical faith grouping, and even the politics of contemporary hermeneutical schemes. Within a therapeutic culture, individuals as well as couple or family groupings are self-conscious about their families of origin, that is blood kinship groupings, as well as perplexed about the shifts even in definitions of what constitutes a family that are occurring to them as well as around them.

With such intensities and passions, it is also not surprising that discussions of family life have become politicized—remember the recent White House Conferences on the Family. Indeed, within the United Church of Christ, the denominational selection of *Peace and Family Life* as co-equal priorities recognized the hopefully creative tensions between those advocating broad justice concerns, on the one hand, and care and concern for the primary human unit on the other.

Thus preaching about family life is as risky as it is necessary, for real issues are at stake and cultural change is frightening. It is not always clear what the central interpretive principles are, or even what the invitation is to! These brief remarks begin by assuming, with Brueggeman, that family life is the central paradigm out of which we interpret the world, including our use of religious language, and the central location for learning how to live in the world. Further, the family is both historical, that is, living out its ordinary existence within the dynamic tensions of the real world, and an organism, continually shaping and re-shaping itself over time. The pastor, then, who is addressing those has both a stake in the subject and a hunger after being able to understand or “name” what is going on. In daring the family paradigm, the pastor is

preaching the dynamics of human history and invitations as to how humans are to learn to live together, over time, in the midst of complex cultural tensions.

The next three sections offer insight into what is being interpreted, what is being invited, and what are some helpful resources, including the pastor's own wisdom and creativity.

But first let us note some of the rich Scriptural resources and interpretations that await us:

Families come in all sizes and types. There are big, extended families like the family of Lot, with children, and aunts, and uncles, and cousins, and grandparents, and grandchildren.

There are small families like the family of Elizabeth and Zechariah, who were of advanced years when John, their only son, was born.

There are multi-generational families like Timothy's, whose mother Eunice and grandmother Lois shared the responsibilities of child-rearing.

Some families are made up of single persons like Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus.

Others are single-parent families like the widow and her two sons whom Elisha befriended.

Some families remain childless and, like Priscilla and Aquila, lead rich, full lives.

Some broken families, like Naomi and Ruth, know the pain of loss and the joy of new family ties.

All persons do not experience being part of a family in the same way. Some, like Joseph and his brothers, find themselves caught in unpleasant or painful situations.

In other families, a shared hope or an unfulfilled dream draws loved ones closer. Abraham and Sarah knew the frustration of waiting, and wanting, and waiting . . . together.

Who are the people you call family?²

Interpretations

The preacher as interpreter speaks to what is being experienced, looking with depth beneath surfaces to the dynamics of family life that allow the sermon to disclose the truthful intersections with Scriptural and theological meanings. At best, the hearers will respond by saying: yes, that's it! I'd never seen it before. And with the interpretation "true," the invitation is taken more seriously. But first let us consider three such central interpretations.

First

The wise and experienced pastor/preacher knows how hard family life is. In Neuhaus' language about community and family "Real community is not homogeneity. It is the discipline and devotion of disparate peo-

ple bearing with one another in the hard tasks of love.”³ Liberals and conservatives alike recognize the reality of this. Brothers and sisters *are* at odds; enmity and treachery exist within living parish families and within Bible stories. Members of families let one another down; they go away from one another in the very processes of growth and of aging; they miscommunicate; they are on opposite sides of wars and of elections, and hopelessly and helplessly keep trying to control one another.

This is data from the family paradigm that discloses central preaching issues. How are we to stay together over time, dealing with our differences? What is the meaning of a relational creation? What does fidelity mean at its depths, and are there ways in which covenants differ from contracts? This relatively simple notation of the realities of family life invites an interpretation of historical existence that takes the data with full seriousness, while placing it in some perspective and inviting creative response. And because the data are so real, so concrete, they cannot be preached away with niceties or static pictures. Perhaps the second crucial interpretation will help.

Second

In both blood kinship systems and those families that form in other ways, a central task is learning how to deal with others. Moreover, these “others” cannot ultimately be controlled; they do not yield lightly to what we desire them to be, or collapse neatly into our expectations. Anyone who is or has a parent or a child has intimations of this! Nor do spouses or even roommates continually fulfill our needs—or give up their own in which we are expected to participate! The family paradigm is truly one of learning to deal with “otherness.” And, in a world of shifting authorities, by what Authority do we stay together to negotiate our competing worlds? What power of the self is necessary in order to receive another self without having to take it over? Is it possible that power within family life is as much the power to receive as it is the power to control? Such ponderings surely lead to theological interpretations of the nature of God as Other—whom we also try to control—as well as the Stranger within our midst.

Such interpretations begin with pastoral wisdom and probe beneath the surface of family life to those profound and truthful dynamics of strangers learning how to live together in history, in the Name of an Authoritative Power, who seeks to have them covenant together in fidelity. The family paradigm is a paradigm that opens up opportunities to preach about living in the world. A *third* interpretation, however, must here suffice.

Third

Family life, like social and national life, is continually changing. The

children grow and the parents age; new opportunities open for women and economic challenges beset men; the compliant eight year old becomes the rebel teen-ager; a middle aged wife seeks ordination; a decent husband wanders astray; a child becomes that which is not valued; one is widowed prematurely and singles celebrate rather than bemoan their status.

The perspectives of the Faith claim to be able to interpret change and even crisis. Humans are finite, not in control; despair and sadness push even the Psalmist to the limits; life doesn't work out as we had planned; and yet

Within the family paradigm the dynamics between varying needs to be dependent and to be independent or autonomous are continually shifting, and in the midst of such change the Presence of the One who promises remains at least an intimation of hope. Indeed the interpretive possibilities are almost endless, for the Scriptures themselves speak of an historical people, living in history with their eyes on promised futures, caught always in contradiction and struggle, but accompanied always by the One who came to live amidst the same history and the Spirit which remains.

Invitation

Because of the almost primordial status of the family paradigm, it invites expansion. Interpretation is not only pastoral but prophetic. It makes eminently good sense that the United Church of Christ should have selected Peace *and* Family Life not as competing, but rather as complementary, priorities. Again let us note three interpretations that here become, more clearly, invitations.

First

The biological family of the Scriptures is to become more and more inclusive of others, of strangers, even. It is to demonstrate hospitality to those outside the household. Indeed, even as the self is to experience enough power in order NOT to have to control others, the family is to become comfortable enough with its own roots and values not to be threatened by others.

But these must not just be nice words that the preacher utters! For everyone within the biological family knows just how hard it is even to receive the Stranger among them! Yet the paradigm opens itself up to the continuing proclamation of the oneness of the human family—and a continual embodiment of this intent as the "hard tasks of love." And so the family paradigm opens up ecumenical interpretation, the struggles between nations, the patience of leaders who keep communication open and the structures that allow for real differences to be explored through human process and contact. Surely the issues of Peace and Family Life

intersect. Surely preaching about either transcends the simple categories of conservative and liberal and moves toward those dynamics of human beings struggling together in history which are so powerfully disclosed in Scripture and our theological traditions.

Second

There are of course those situations where “otherness” cannot be received. Divorce occurs. Siblings become estranged. Nations rise up against nations. Within the dynamics of living, complex organisms within history, interpretations can occur as well as invitations toward new response. Forgiveness can be viewed as a radical act—perhaps the most radical of all, whether of family member or political opponent. Perhaps new imperatives can be raised to care for the “other” even through estrangement. A family example might be the struggles to retain communication following divorce, so that enmities need not be carried on in the lives of the children. Certainly preaching can seek to modify the triumphalism of estrangement, and focus on the oft neglected dynamic of human sadness that may even lie behind the more obvious expressions of anger. How is one to live thru such times? Once again, simple answers or formulae must not substitute for more profound interpretations and scripturally based prophetic injunctions. And wise pastors may offer prophetic styles that intersect personal and justice issues in ways that no one else can accomplish.

Third

Because such issues are so human, so historical, so perennial, we might say, the preacher can offer prophetic interpretations that have to do with Kairos and chronos, God’s time and human time, and such devotion that one, at least, does not “go away” or remove oneself from history. The energies to take on the “hard tasks of love” may be dissipated by burn-out or a retreat into moralisms without an underlying theological base and spiritual enrichment that keeps humans not only “hanging in there” but faithful to the promises. Again the wise pastor will see the rich interpretive/prophetic opportunities to address the human situation in both its stark realism and its nevertheless joyful promises.

Resources

These brief remarks have themselves been meant to be invitational to wise and creative pastor/preachers to use their own rich resources of pastoral experience and personal faithfulness. The pastor/theologian and the pastor/Biblical scholar is rooted in the richest interpretive scheme of all—and one that always invites new perceptions, new actions, new ways of being in the world. Perhaps the best beginning at preaching out of and

to the family paradigm is ecclesial existence itself, where pastor and people stand and live in the middle of history, at those complex intersections of existence where God comes to the human and there is intentional struggle to live in the promised ways.

There are, of course, other resources. The United Church of Christ is offering its pastors more specific ideas than these to enrich their personal offerings. A simple outline suggests four topics: Family, Including the Excluded (Psalm 46; Ephesians 2:12-22); Where Are Our Children? (Matthew 18:1-6; 19:13-15); Marriage Today: Bring On Fidelity (Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Luke 16:10-13); and The Individual vs. The Family (Genesis 1:26-2:3; Galatians 3:23-37).⁴ Family therapists offer profound insight into the family as dynamic organism, and developmental psychology (in particular relationship to faith development) offers perspectives on change, as does crisis thought.

But the confidant pastor/preacher is her or his own best resource as we ponder our own pastoral experiences with families in relation to our own Scriptural awareness, theological stance and faith pilgrimage.

We are simply asked
to make gentle our bruised world,
to tame its savageness,
to be compassionate of all,
including ourselves.
Then, in the time left over,
to repeat the Ancient Tale
and go the way
of God's foolish ones.

Peter Byrne, S.J.

The family paradigm is crucial to such interpretive and invitational tasks and opportunities. Fulfilling them is, after all, what our Calling intends.

NOTES

1. Brueggemann, Walter "The Covenanted Family: A Zone for Humanness," *Journal of Current Social Issues*, Vol. 14, No. 1, (Winter, 1977), 18-23.

2. "The Common Lot," published by the UCC Coordinating Center for Women in Church and Society, November, 1982, No. 23, 1.

3. From Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry*, page 112.

4. From *Keeping You Posted*, a UCC newsletter, 1/15/83. The sermon series is available from the Division of Health and Welfare, U.C.B.H.M.-17th Floor, 132 West 31st St., New York, NY 10001, Att: Faith Johnson. Other titles include: "What the Church Says to Men"; "The Evangelical Feminist in the Family"; "Is There a Place for Me in the Family." Such resources are viewed as stimuli to one's own creative interpretation/invitation.

5. From the invitation to the ordination of a Jesuit priest.