

Family Values: Jesus' Style

Mother's Day

Text: Mark 3:35; John 21:16-17

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

"Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Mark 3:35

"Do you love me? ...Tend my sheep...Feed my sheep." John 21:16-17

The family is an endangered species. You hear about it all over the place. What ever has happened to the family? This statement for example: "Much of the very mechanism of our modern life is destructive of the family." That statement is a quote from the *National Congregational Council Report*, 1892. They were saying it 100 years ago, and they are saying it today. There are prophets of doom all over the place who are telling us that society is unraveling, social relationships are full of brokenness and pain, and the family cannot possibly endure the pressure.

Actually we are being barraged with bad news about the family, and in his book *Culture Wars*, James Davison Hunter says that, in those social issues that are tearing the fabric of American society apart, the family is the very central focus. The things that center around the politicization and the debate about the family are at the very center of those issues that seem to be at the core of what is causing so much ferment and so much disruption in the social order. The Congregational Report said, "the very mechanism of modern life is destructive of family," 100 years ago. And so in our day there are incredible pressures and forces at work, creating new situations daily and with every passing decade. The pressures on the family are not to be gainsaid.

Nonetheless I want to bring to you this morning a message of hope about my conviction for the potential that lies before us for creating in our day a more humane world and a greater sense of community which accords dignity and worth to every individual. All of the ruckus in our day about the destruction of the family is coming largely from the religious right. Now I don't like labels. I know it's too easy to lump people into a category and to label it and to do away with them. But I don't know how else to say what I need to say this morning without saying some things rather clearly that will help you to get the context of my comments. We live in a day when (again, I have to use a labeling word)

“conservative” means those who have become rigid in their righteous views. Now, I use this word narrowly. In its broader sense I am a conservative. Every enlightened and educated person needs to have a conservative edge to him or her because a conservative is one who would preserve the best values of the past. So I don't like to give up the word conservative to a single definition. But it is used to describe what, in the Christian movement, in the Christian Church today, is a very vocal and a very militant right wing. Sometimes we speak of fundamentalists. Their approach to scripture is literal. Morality is very tight, reflecting a pattern of long ago.

“Family Values” has become a code word for these people who have a very definite idea of what the family ought to be as ordained by God. But as James Hunter Davison says in this book *Culture Wars*, what is at stake is a certain idealized form of the nineteenth-century middle class family, a male-dominated nuclear family that both sentimentalized childhood and motherhood, and at the same time celebrated domestic life as a utopian retreat from the harsh realities of industrialized society. What the religious right is focused on is a model of the 19th century, that has certainly continued into this century, but which is in itself a relatively new (250 years or so old) view of a traditional family.

In the culture wars phenomena of our day we have a great polarization in society, the polarization of those calling for new forms and shapes of human community, and those who would go back to the so called traditional or nuclear family. Researchers tell us today that in what many conceive of as the traditional family, where the father goes to work and there is a male dominated home and the mother stays home and cares for the children, and children experience the nurture of two parents, that that is the experience of only 4-7% of our population.

Yet today we have a great cry and hand-wringing about the unraveling and disintegration of the family and the fabric of society. I want to say to you that I think a lot of the fear that sometimes borders on hysteria is the consequence of the excessive media saturation that we have, much of which is very right wing, particularly in the case of television, Christian broadcasting. I don't spend much time with TV and I spend even less on Christian broadcasting. Some of you may be offended by this, but I have got to tell you I think that much of the appeal of these TV personalities draws fives and tens of dollars out of sincere humble and relatively poor people who are concerned about these issues. But just as disconcerting is the reality that they are also supported by the thousands and hundreds of thousands of dollars of some of the wealthy who would support them in order to reinforce the status quo of a day gone by. I don't think this world is being made more humane through the efforts of Christian television. I think Christian broadcasting networks, Trinity Broadcasting, or whatever you want to call it, whatever you want to watch, is a source of divisiveness in society. I think that it creates hostility. It works on people's negative emotions. It creates fear in the human heart, leading to despair, and is one of the great agents in the culture

wars that politicize society and create much of the tension that we have in our society today. (Amen spoken from audience.)

I was delighted when I got to New York last week at my *Perspectives* meeting to find that the May issue, which I hadn't received yet, has an opening article by David Meyers. David, a very respected social psychologist at Hope College was here a few weeks ago talking about his book, *In Pursuit of Happiness*. The title of his topic in *Perspectives* was "Let's Focus on the Family." Now you'll probably catch that the code words "Focus on the Family" is the title of the program authored by James Dobson. Some years ago we showed a series of films with that title by James Dobson, here on Sunday evenings. They were very good. They had a lot of good stuff in them.

But what has happened to the whole Focus on the Family movement, the Dobson movement, is that it has become, I think, a movement that has broadened out beyond the families to the whole cultural war agenda. Homosexuality, the abortion issue, I could give you the statistics from David Meyers to show that what has happened to "Focus on the Family" is that it is no longer a focus on the family. Meyers is pleading with the right *and* the left, now that the election is over, to begin to truly focus on the issues of family, because while I think that the hysteria and the hand-wringing is all out of proportion, there is no doubt that the family is critical to the well being of society and the family needs our deep concern and deep commitment.

David Meyers states in this article, for example, these troubling facts: child abuse reports have soared from well under a million cases annually to nearly three million. The divorce rate has doubled. The happiness in surviving marriages has slightly declined. Teen sexual activity has doubled with accompanying increases in sexually transmitted diseases. The 5% of babies born to unwed mothers in 1960 has quintupled to more than 27%. Increasingly everywhere in America children are having children. In 1960 one in ten children did not live with two parents. Today nearly three in ten do not. Now that's just a collage by David Meyers and we could get other statistics and other dimensions of this from many sources, so don't hear me saying this morning that there is not a concern for the wellbeing of the family. Don't hear me saying that we do not need to redouble our efforts for the nurture of the family and the support of the family as an institution.

All of that is true, but I want to say to you as a Christian community that there is a kind of hysterical frenzied hand-wringing cry full of despair and hopelessness which I think is like acid undercutting the morale of the body politic, the social structure, rather than bringing to it a kind of positive nurture and insight that we as the family of God experience together and need to share with our world. There is such a division and such a polarization in our society, fueled by intensive fundamentalist media saturation, so that I think people fail to gain an historical perspective and sometimes lose their civility and their decency. And with that

they lose also then the creative positive power to make a difference and to effect human transformation, the kind of human transformation that's going on in Griffith School with their "Circle of Friends," where children are learning how to care for one another.

No, dear friends, the family isn't going to fail. People are going to learn to live in every new social situation in covenant and in faithfulness. People are going to continue to find ways to live in marriages, to raise and to nurture children, and to build human community. In a book that I picked up this week, *What Ever Happened to the Family* there is a discussion of 1930 to 1990, only 60 years, but in that survey of those 60 years, it is amazing that there are any of us that are still normal, and sometimes I question us as well. Think about it. 1930 to 1990. The great depression into the 40s with the Second World War and world convulsion, into the 50s with the kind of euphoria following the war and that era of peace and well-being that was also an era of permissiveness and fear of parenting in many respects. The eruption of the 60s, the whole civil rights movement, moving into the narcissism and "me" generation of the 70s and into the 80s, and to the present. We have not only fewer traditional families, nuclear families, we have blended families and we have perpetual families. We have all kinds of new arrangements, new forms of family and community. And it is not surprising when you think about the tremendous ferment in the world in the last half century.

Hear me. The form of the family will change. The form of the family has *always* changed. There is no static period in human history. Every time there is a social eruption there is resultant change. And in the meantime there has always been social evolution so that new forms have evolved and people have simply learned to live in new arrangements. Sometimes it's been good, sometimes not so good. The pendulum swings back and forth. But don't believe anybody that tells you that this is the worst of all possible times.

There are also wonderful signs of new possibility in our day. We have the possibility in our world today with changing forms so obvious of using our creativity to build a more humane world. Goodness sakes, aren't we aware, isn't it impossible not to be aware in our world today of so many things that were hidden to our forbearers? Don't we know today that we are called upon to treat every person with dignity and respect? Don't we know today that the nineteenth century nuclear family that was male dominated was oppressive to women even when women didn't know they were being oppressed? Don't we know today that the whole issue of abortion is about human rights? Don't we know today that sexism is as blatant a sin as racism, which continues even into our day? Don't we know today that sexual orientation is not a choice and a preference, but a given and that such people need to be accorded human dignity and worth?

Don't we know today that the possibility for human relationship and human community is as multiple as there are types of people? Is not the diversity of the human family an indication of a God who loves diversity and loves with

prodigality? Don't we know today that we could be on the threshold of a world that may be unraveling in order that it may be woven into a more beautiful pattern?

I have a friend who loves to say, "It is necessary to let things chaoticize." We don't like things to chaoticize. We want things orderly and predictable and manageable, but as a matter of fact it is the chaoticization of those structures and forms that create the openings where the new light can come through. But we can find new arrangements and new possibilities where we are people of good will who will treat one another with dignity and with value. That is the possibility. The forms will change because they will give way to the accelerating pressures of our contemporary world. But you can't go home, friends, you can never turn the clock back, and the Christian family has no right to wring its hands in despair and sit down in hopelessness and weep.

It is for us to model out a new community, because while the *form* of the family changes the *function* of the family remains the same. It is the *function* of the family to create the space for human connectedness where we learn to love and where we are loved, where we are cared for and we learn to care, where we see modeled out compassion and become compassionate. The family must be the one place in this world where love is unconditional, enabling us to be released to love unconditionally.

The form of the family will change. Let it go. The function of the family will always be the same: the creation of human connectedness where I know I belong, where I know I am loved, where I am accepted just because I am, where I am cared for, where I in turn learn to love, to care, to mend and to heal, to do unto others as has been done to me in the community, the form of the family that is mine.

But beyond the biological family, the family of God. We here, in this Christian community, we can be the extended family. It was in the 50s with all our prosperity and our economic acceleration and the growth of corporations and the moving of people all over the country in that time of prosperity that we lost the extended family. And again, you never go home. But we have the possibility in the church to be family to one another, to experience community here, to know our connectedness, to be cared for and to care, to feel the compassionate love and support of another and to compassionately love and support.

I don't think Jesus probably ever celebrated Mother's Day. You know mothers are wonderful and Jesus had a Jewish mother, which is really special, I guess. There was a day when he got out on a limb somewhere and they said to Mary, "Have you read the newspaper report?" She said, "Don't tell me!" She said to Jesus' brothers, "Go get him. Let's bring him home." Doesn't every mother want her son or her daughter to be decent, somewhere down the middle, not too far to the right or to the left? I know that as long as my mother was alive I stayed pretty close to the middle. (Laughter) I mean, it's just a matter of respect, you know? But Jesus

was out there turning the world upside down and Mary came to where he was preaching and she couldn't even penetrate the crowd, so she sent him a message: "Dear Son, I have come for you. Your Mother." Not "Hi Son, This is Mom." This was signed "*Your Mother*." It must have been hard for her to receive a note back: "Dear Mother, who is my mother? Who is my sister? Who is my brother? Those who do the will of God, those are family to me." Not in any way to denigrate the ties that are biological, but in the Christian community we know of ties that bind us more firmly, with a greater bonding: the ties of the family of God – those who do the will of God, those who love and seek to create a loving community.

I think that's "Family Values: Jesus' Style," because what God is about, dear friends, is to make better lovers of us all. Thank God.