

WHAT FAMILIES DO
Sermon for Pentecost 13A-Mt 18:15-20
LPC, 9/7/14

The Washington Post last week reported the release of a report for the Council on Contemporary Families which highlights a dramatic change in the make-up of American families. Whereas in the 1950's, 65% of children under 15 were raised in families where the father went out to work and the mother stayed home, that figure today is 22%. Today 34% of American children are being raised in two-career families. The rest are in single-parent or less conventional families. Today less than half of all households are headed by a married couple.

This is troubling. The long-term implications of these changes in society are unknown. The family has, as long as anyone can remember, been the foundation of orderly society. What does it mean when the definition of family changes so dramatically?

These issues pose a special concern for us religious people. Christians have always believed that God intended people to live in families. When Adam was created, remember, God said that it was not good for him to be alone and created a companion for him. The Prayer for Families in our Prayer Book says God actually "places the solitary in families."

So as Christians, how do we respond to this report, which seems to indicate that the family is in danger?

The temptation is to identify what is responsible for these changes and stop them. That might involve banning birth control, barring women from the workforce, and forbidding divorce. Even if we wanted to do those things, we couldn't. We can't undo what has been done.

For the moment, at least, let's explore a more productive, possibly more Christian response to these social changes. If you will: What Would Jesus Do? Since Jesus always seemed to respond to people where they were, rather than where they should have been according to religious convention, I think we have to start by considering that a lot of people with unconventional living arrangements did not choose their situation. Our response needs to begin with compassion.

I think we also need to consider that the Gospel itself has a definition of family that extends beyond the traditional. Early Christians banded together in groups that were not physically related, but formed such closely-knit relationships that church members were called "brother" and "sister."

Today's Gospel reading from Matthew is a passage where the family-closeness of the church is apparent, at least in the original Greek. The New Revised Standard translation we heard this morning unfortunately suppresses this theme. The NRSV has Jesus saying, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone." The original Greek says, "If your brother sins..."

What follows is a formula for reconciliation. The value of this pattern to us today is not so much that we should follow it in every detail, but that we get the point that a follower of Jesus

goes to considerable trouble to maintain relationship with a family member. In other words, this passage must never be used as an excuse to exclude someone as a Gentile or tax collector. This passage occurs in the Gospel of Matthew in the context of a sermon on restoration and forgiveness. Next week we'll get the part about forgiving 70 times 7. And remember that Jesus himself treated Gentiles and tax collectors like family.

The family analogy for people who are not related to us is powerful. What happens in families? In good, strong families? Family bonds endure. Allowances are made. Sins are forgiven and irritating traits condoned. Relationships survive separation. People rejoice with each other's victories and support each other in loss. It's what families do. When we are able to extend these family attitudes beyond our immediate households, in ever-expanding circles, we actually build the kingdom of heaven.

Most of us here are blessed with strong family relationships at home. We are further blessed, here at Lawrencefield Church, with a strong family feeling in this congregation. This was shown, considerable beauty and strength, during our recent collective bereavement at the death of our brother Bill Neer. As a group we are sad. But as a group we have been at our best as we help our sister Jaci, and each other, through this difficult time. It's what families do.

Let's keep at this family thing.

The best way for us to respond to reports of the apparent decline of the family is to *be* family, in our homes, in our church, and, as we are able through the grace of God, in the world. Let's support other people who are trying to be family, even if their household doesn't look like a 50's sitcom. Let's work at reconciliation. Let's offer healing. It's what families do.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the architect of the Truth and Reconciliation project that spared South Africa further trauma during its transition to majority rule, was the speaker at my seminary graduation. His message was simple: "We are all one family." This might have been a nice but ordinary message for me but for what had happened the previous evening.

At Virginia Seminary, there is always a communion service for graduates and their families the night before graduation. My mother and father were there, although I wasn't sitting with them because I had the honor of serving at the altar that night, with Archbishop Tutu celebrating.

This was one of the last times my father was able to travel and he was very frail. As he came painfully up the aisle on my mother's arm with his cane, other communicants backed up behind him, he was so slow. I was serving the other side of the altar rail from where they received so I didn't find out till later what happened.

Evidently, when my father approached the rail, Bishop Tutu laid his hands on my father and blessed him in a gesture of healing before giving the communion bread. The service was not a healing service, and I didn't see him do this to anyone else. In a very Christ-like way, the good bishop had seen a need for healing and had offered it.

It's what families do.