

Sermon by Ted Mosebach  
First Congregational Church  
United Church of Christ  
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### Family Values

(Sixth in series, Contemporary Issues in Religion and Morality)

*Matthew 8:18-22; Mark 3:31-35; John 19:25b-27 NRSV*

Perhaps there are few issues with broader popular appeal than family values. Who is against families? If we are the products of what we considered to be good families then we know how important and wonderful family life can be. If we did not grow up in a stable loving family we might be all the more determined to create one of our own in adulthood. And yet, isn't it true, that family life is one of the things with which we struggle the most, about which we might feel at times the most inadequate, and about which we experience the most guilt? In short, isn't family life difficult?

A few years ago the planners of our Winter Weekend retreat chose as a theme for that year, "Families in the Bible". The planning team asked me to provide them with examples of happy biblical families. I could scarcely find any. On the other hand, there are plenty of biblical examples of dysfunctional families. Stories of dysfunctional families are scattered from beginning to end in the Bible. But stories of healthy families in the Bible are rare. Can you think of any besides Jesus' own family, and we shall soon see that even in Jesus' family there was some tension.

One thing we might learn from this is to be cautious about any thinking that if we would just be good Christians then our family lives will be smooth and joyful all the time. Nothing might be further from the truth! Does God even intend family life to be easy? Are not the really helpful growing places in life often difficult, otherwise we would not grow from them? I don't think there is anything more important that I have ever done, or anything more difficult, than trying to be a good family member, be that as a son or husband or brother or father or now grandfather. And from what I have observed through thirty five years of ministry, all of us can do a better job with our family relationships. I often share with couples who meet with me for pre-marital conversations the conventional wisdom not to expect that after they are married they will be able to change the other person. On the other hand, I then add, they ought certainly to expect that they will need to change themselves! Family life is difficult. That is one reason why it is so valuable. It presses us to improve ourselves.

If one value of family life for Christians is its difficulty, what might some others be? To my mind they are these. Christian family values are all the joys and heartaches, pleasures and pains, satisfactions and frustrations, self-discoveries and lessons learned, which come through making loving commitments. Surely it is the idea of loving

commitments that stand at the heart of a Christian understanding of family values. Every proper Christian relationship is built upon a loving commitment. It was a loving commitment which started everything when God made the world and gave it to humankind to tend and keep. It was out of God's commitment to love us that God gave us the law and then the prophets so that we might live well and prosper. And when all else failed God came to us in Jesus Christ to die a gruesome death proving that God's commitment of love to us is that deep.

Christians value loving commitments. From marriage vows to promises spoken or unspoken between friends, loving commitments are always holy because they are patterned after God's loving commitment to the world. Within families they may be the most powerful of all. Families relationships are secured in one of two ways: through either the legally binding commitments of marriage and adoption, or through the biological bonds of heredity. Family life is so powerful because the loving commitments involved can not easily be broken. There is the adage I heard somewhere that home is where when you knock on the door they have to let you in. Well, not quite, but almost. There is divorce, and goodness knows it is necessary sometimes, but the idea is that one can not walk away from one's spouse easily. When children are involved, the relationship between mother and father continues in some way even after a divorce. And a son is always a son and a mother is always a mother, and a daughter is always a daughter and a father is always a father. No matter how neglectful one may choose to be in these relationships, even whether or not one chooses to recognize one's own child or parents, whether we act like a son or a daughter or a father or a mother or not, we still are those people.

Because of the depth of the loving commitments involved, in family relationships we must try to work things out. We must try sometimes to see our own fault. We must try especially hard in family relationships not to be selfish, to do the loving thing. I may have shared this story before now, but it is such a good example of the point this morning that I will share it once more. I always ask the question to couples who wish me to officiate at their wedding why it is that they want to get married. After all, we know that marriage is not really a social requirement for living together today. One of the best answers I ever received to this question of why a person would want to get married was given by a woman in her late twenties who had until then enjoyed a life of being what is sometimes described as foot loose and fancy free. She went to parties with her friends whenever she wanted and could fly with hardly a moment's consideration on a whimsical trip to the Caribbean. And so she paused for a moment after I asked the question of why she wanted now to get married and then said, "Because I am tired of having fun." What a marvelous answer! Now she wanted more than self indulgence. Now she wanted more than simple laughter. Now she wanted a purpose greater than just taking care of her self. Now she wanted love. Family relationships are not always easy, they are not always what we might call a good time, but if we fulfill our responsibilities within them they will always bring out the best in us. And to believe that is to believe in family values.

Debbie and I are married. So sometimes Debbie and I have disagreements and sometimes they are keen. And sometimes we might have an argument and at the end of it

I am still convinced that I am right and also that I have made my point quite well, thank you. And then after some time goes by and there is some quelling of the atmosphere, I actually begin to think, and even conclude that maybe I was not right, that actually *she* made a pretty good point. And so I might say something to the effect of, "I'm sorry I was so insistent, maybe I was wrong." And often as not, she will respond with something like, "Maybe I was wrong, too." And so, with the assistance of grace, we are both better people because of the tension, because of the loving commitment we have made to each other. To believe in that, is to believe in family values.

But people may wish not to get involved in such relationships. Surely life is easier without the entanglements of family life, and so there is the hesitancy on the part of some people to make such loving commitments in the first place. The average age of people getting married continues to rise, and before we judge too harshly about this, we might see that the divorce rate now is declining. Rushing into family commitments too early may be just as mistaken as resisting them too long. But we might be concerned that the ever lengthening postponement of marriage and family commitments may reflect an increasing uncertainty about their benefit. If there is a crisis of losing family values in society today it might be that. A while ago I was speaking with an unmarried couple who had created a child together. It seemed obvious to me that they both loved the child very much and seemed happy to cooperate with each other in caring for the child and providing the best life they could for her. Observing this I became a bit confused and said to them, you know you seem both to want to be good parents and it seems to me that you love and respect each other as well. Why don't you get married and raise your daughter in a home in which she can feel secure because she knows that you have dedicated yourselves to it by marriage. To this possibility the man responded, "Oh, I'm not ready for that kind of commitment." Well.

Perhaps at this point it would be right to mention some things that family values are not. Family values are not just about sexuality. To use the term as a euphemism for opposition to any sexual behavior apart from that between a man and a woman in a traditional home is to dilute the term of its deeper implications. If family values were only about sexuality than there would be no family values at stake in relationships between children and parents, or between siblings, or grandparents and grandchildren, or aunts and uncles and nieces and nephews nor for any single person.

Finally, for Christians, to have family values does not mean that we care only about our own families. Charity may often begin at home, but for Christians it does not end there. Once when Jesus was calling people to follow him a man said, *I will follow you but first let me go and bury my father*. Surely not an unreasonable request, we might think. But Jesus said to the man, *Let the dead bury the dead, you come and follow me*. At another time Jesus' own family sought him while he was teaching. The implication was that they were concerned about what he was doing. When he was told that his mother and brothers and sisters were asking for him he said, *Who are my mother and my brothers?* And then looking at those who were about him he said, *Here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters. Everyone who does the will of God is my brother and*

*sister and mother.* For Christians, family life is our first and greatest responsibility, but it is not our only one.

When Jesus was on the cross he looked down and saw his mother standing there beside the apostle John, and Jesus said to her, *Woman, here is your son.* And to John he said, *Here is your mother.* And we are told that from that moment on John took her into his own home. We might suppose such a thing was not easy for John. To keep the mother of his Lord in John's home would surely complicate John's life in countless ways. What a difficult commitment of love it was for John to take a woman into his home who was not his mother but treat her as if she was! What changes it might require of him! What strength he would need in order to make her happiness as important as his own. But we might suppose that is exactly why he did it. John was a Christian man and he had family values.