

*Jesus' Family Values*

In the beginning God created families. As the story is told in Genesis chapter 2, we hear that God created a man and then he created a woman. The way a father might present a bride to a groom at a wedding, God presented the woman to the man. God had ordained that the two of them would be different but complimentary. He said that they should become one flesh. The man and the woman were married and became a family.

The proposed Lutheran Social Statement on Human Sexuality affirms the traditional biblical teaching that marriage is properly understood as being between one man and one woman. Marriage and family then are not merely human social contracts that can we modify at will or distort to fit modern fads. Marriage and family are God's creations, and only God, as their creator, has the right to define them. There may be all different sorts of romantic and sexual relationships out there, but in God's creation there is only one type of institution properly called marriage.

We are blessed that God allows us human beings to participate in the process of continuing life by creating new human beings. I am talking about conception, pregnancy, and childbirth. So that children might be raised correctly and provided for adequately, God has ordained that a man and a woman who become one flesh, that is, who are married, should provide the proper context for procreation. Having many different kinds of support networks available can be helpful in rearing children, including schools and churches. A village can assist in raising a child. And for many different

reasons it is not always possible for the biological parents to raise the child they created, and in those instances we thank God for adoptive families.

But the most basic building blocks of society, the most primary natural relationships in child development, are nuclear families consisting of parents and children. This is the usual, normative pattern we see in the Bible and its long lists of “begats”. For various reasons, sometimes families do not fit the traditional model, we even see that occasionally in the Bible, and that’s okay. Such families can be successful too, but the order God created is the optimal one.

The Ten Commandments mentions families. The Fourth Commandment instructs us to honor our mother and father. That commandment was probably quoted to me more by my parents when I was growing up than any other. Luther does teach us that the Fourth Commandment applies to our obedience to all kinds of legitimate authority, including our parents when we are young. In its original context the emphasis of the commandment was on an adult child caring for his or her parents in the old age. There is a certain kind of reciprocity in family life as those who receive care early in life later have the chance to care for those who first cared for them. Good families then are models of justice and mercy. Good families reflect and incarnate God’s loving care for his people.

Jesus himself was born into a human family. I suppose the Son of God could have just dropped out of Heaven to Earth, but our Heavenly Father chose instead that our Savior would be born in the normal way and have a normal family life. In that way God has additionally sanctified marriage,

parenthood, and family life, by bringing his divine presence into the Holy Family.

We do not know much about Jesus' growing up years. The one incident recorded in Luke's gospel about the twelve year-old Jesus staying in the temple with the doctors of law, and Mary and Joseph searching for him until they find him, gives us just a glimpse of the love and care Mary and Joseph had for their very special son, as well as Jesus' loving concern for his parents tempered by his primary obedience to his Heavenly Father.

Apparently Jesus followed his foster father Joseph into his profession of carpentry, as was the tradition in that time and place, and his mother Mary and Jesus remained close in Jesus' adult years. The Holy Family is a good, healthy model for all families.

How strange then, and seemingly out of character, that Jesus would say, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, and, yes, even his own life, he cannot be my disciple." What is up with that! Was there a momentary breakdown in the functioning of Jesus' family that he was reacting to? What about the time that Jesus' family thought Jesus was beside himself, as in "out of his mind," and they came to take Jesus away before his brash words got him into trouble? Was family really a hindrance or burden to Jesus? Is Jesus calling Christians to abandon the traditional family unit for some new type of social structure? If Jesus was running for political office today he would probably be criticized for being weak on Family Values.

It is easy to understand how Jesus' family might not have fully understood right away who Jesus was and what he was about. How could you deal with the very Son of God in the midst of your earthly family? Their confusion is understandable as are any stumbling blocks they might have put in front of Jesus out of their genuine but misguided concern for his well being. When Jesus says we must hate our parents, spouse, and children he is engaging in a bit of hyperbole. Jesus is exaggerating a bit to get our attention and to drive home his point.

We see something similar in Genesis when we are told that God loved Jacob but hated Esau. God didn't really hate Esau, but God did prefer Jacob. When Jesus tells us to hate our family he is saying that we must love him more than anything else, even our families. We have a natural inclination, and even a religious command to love our families, but Jesus is saying to us that he must be a higher priority to us than even our parents, spouse and siblings, as important as they are. We must love Jesus even more than we love them, and he tells us to not allow family ties to come between us and the Kingdom of God.

Jesus is certainly not anti-family; Jesus, and the church which follows his lead, are very much pro-family. There is biblical evidence to back that up. Perhaps foremost is what occurred when Jesus when on the cross. There, in his dying agony, Jesus fulfilled his obligation as a son and saw to it that his apparently widowed mother would be provided for after his death by telling Mary and John, the beloved disciple, that henceforth they would be mother and son. That is how important family relations were to Jesus. Also, one of Jesus first miracles was to heal his disciple Peter's mother-in-law. Peter,

ever faithful to his family commitments, took his wife along on his missionary trips years later.

In the early years of the church, to convert to Christianity from either Judaism or Paganism, usually brought about the convert's rejection from his or her family of origin. In the church, then, while supporting and encouraging family values, church members often became like family to one another. Early on the church saw the wisdom in appointing godparents for newly baptized children who would provide for the child should the parents be martyred, which was an ever-present threat. Also, church members took to calling one another brother or sister, and to calling elders mother or father, as in a family. Some denominations still use these familial terms.

Perhaps the best description of and prescription for church and family life in the early church comes from 1 Tim. 5:8 which reads: If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his own family, he has disowned the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. That's strong, harsh language. But it accentuates the importance of family commitments in the early church and tells us how our family commitments should be today.

It's true that sometimes commitment to one's family goes overboard. People have sometimes treated the rest of the world poorly, and even committed heinous crimes, for the benefit of their families. That's just obviously wrong. The same moral standards apply inside and outside of families. Family members who abuse or neglect other family members in their charge give up their rights to honor and obedience normally given to them. Those are some of the reasons why I am often hesitant to use the

family as an analogy for the church. For many people the idea of a family has too many bad connections for some people. Yet, even as the name father recalls bad memories for some people, but still we call God “Father” because his Fatherhood transcends the human notion of what it means to be a father, likewise we can call the church a family because the church, at its best, should be the image of the best a family can be. The church should be inclusive, welcoming, nurturing, and everything a good family is. We are, after all, the family of God.

So love your earthly mothers and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, and children, but love God the Father even more. Support, defend and nurture your families, but do not forget to do those things for the church as well. This is Jesus’ will for us. Amen.