

10 February 2019

Family Values
Mark 10:13-31

We read from the Gospel of Mark, chapter 10, verses 13-16.

¹³People were bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them; and the disciples spoke sternly to them. ¹⁴But when Jesus saw this, he was indignant and said to them, 'Let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁵Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.' ¹⁶And he took them up in his arms, laid his hands on them, and blessed them.

I'm currently working my way through a book called *The Moral Order*, by anthropologist Raoul Naroll. It is Naroll's attempt to describe what morality is going to look like once humanity has finally outgrown its primitive belief in "God." Naroll explains how a new, enlightened, universal moral order, based on science and reason, will one day replace all that silly superstitious stuff, like I believe. Interesting reading. I suspect Naroll will show up in next week's sermon, but one element of his moral thinking applies today. Naroll notes, from study after study, that where families are strong, morality is enhanced. Families hold society together and limit moral disruption, so Naroll makes them an essential part of the new scientific moral order.

Now there are some ways that we Christians might disagree with Naroll, starting with the whole "not believing in God" thing, but here at least we find an area of agreement, don't we? Christians approve of families, too. We point to Genesis 2, where immediately after making man and woman, God ordains family as the foundation of human society. Much of the book of Genesis consists of family records, and God ultimately chooses one family – the family of Abraham – to be the source of blessing for all people. Books like the book of Proverbs make family the center of moral instruction and the primary source of stability and order in society. New Testament books like 1 Timothy affirm the importance of stable, supportive families in the church, and we have this familiar passage in the gospels, where Jesus welcomes and blesses the children. Surely a heart-warming, family-friendly scene. Christians do family, too.

In fact, in recent years, Christians have done family *hard*. As society has changed ever more dramatically, at an ever increasing rate, many Christians have turned to the family – often referred to as the "traditional" family – as a bulwark against scary social change. "Family" has almost become a code word for "Christian" in some circles. Thus we have the American Family Council and Focus on the Family, which are both conservative evangelical lobbying groups. Christians have become active and fervent in resisting the tide of social change, and the general code word for that resistance is "affirming family values." But let's pick up our reading in Mark where we left off.

We read now Mark chapter 10, verses 17-31:

¹⁷As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' ¹⁸Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. ¹⁹You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother." ' ²⁰He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' ²¹Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one

thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ ²²When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

²³Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁴And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.’ ²⁶They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ ²⁷Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

²⁸Peter began to say to him, ‘Look, we have left everything and followed you.’ ²⁹Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, ³⁰who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. ³¹But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.’

So, after that comforting, family-affirming, tradition-friendly scene of Jesus with the children, we get several less comforting scenes. First we have the incident of the rich man who had dutifully kept all the commandments, but whom Jesus then asked to sell all his possessions and give them to the poor. Now we’ve probably all heard many sermons on this story, mostly intent on showing how this was a one-off, a command unique to this man, and that Jesus couldn’t possibly have intended all of us to give all our possessions away. Society would fall apart, and most of all, what would become of our families?

This story is followed by Jesus talking about how hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of heaven – harder than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Again, if you’ve heard this preached on before, the focus was probably on explaining this shocking saying away. Some suggest it was a textual error, and still others have invented a fantasy about how there was a small gate in Jerusalem called the “eye of the needle.” There wasn’t. So this one is a little unsettling, too. But it probably doesn’t bother us that much. Jesus is talking about “rich” people, and for most of us the working definition of “rich person” is “someone with more money than me,” so we don’t really believe he’s talking about us.

But then we get that last bit. Peter points out that he and the other disciples have given up everything to follow him, and Jesus affirms that. “Everyone who left everything for my sake – including brothers and sisters, parents, and children – will be blessed, both in this world and in the next.” But that’s not very family-oriented! Jesus can’t possibly mean that it’s good to desert your family. Probably another – really extensive – textual error, don’t you think? I mean, it’s not like Jesus ever said anything like that anywhere else, is it?

Luke 9:59-62. To another he said, ‘Follow me.’ But he said, ‘Lord, first let me go and bury my father.’ But Jesus said to him, ‘Let the dead bury their own dead; but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God.’ Another said, ‘I will follow you, Lord; but let me first say farewell to those at my home.’ Jesus said to him, ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.’

Luke 12:51-53. Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on, five in one household will be divided, three against two and

two against three; they will be divided father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.'

Luke 14:26. *'Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.'*

But at least Jesus demonstrated good family values in his own family, right?

Mark 3:31-35. *Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'*

Can I just say this? This doesn't *sound* like traditional family values. American theologian David Bentley Hart writes this:

The first, perhaps most crucial thing to understand about the earliest generations of Christians is that theirs was an association of extremists, radical in its rejection of the values and priorities of society . . . They were rabble. They lightly cast off all their prior loyalties and attachments: religion, empire, nation, tribe, even family. In fact, far from teaching "family values," Christ was remarkably dismissive of the family.

So what do we do with this? On the one hand, as we have seen, the Bible *does* affirm the family, especially in the stories and teachings of the Old Testament. But Jesus emphatically doesn't. Is there a way to respect both perspectives?

I think so. I think God did give us the family, and a beautiful gift it was, but it was a gift with a purpose. I think the family is designed to be a sort of laboratory for love, the first place where we can glimpse what God's love for us is like. After all, it is in the family that we learn unprompted love – like that moment when you first hold your newborn baby and realize suddenly that all the world has changed its focus for you forever and that you would do anything, anything for this helpless, wrinkled thing. God's love is like that. It's in the family that we come to understand that love matters more than life itself – because we would give our lives for our children without a second thought. God's love is like that. It's in the family that we experience a love that doesn't give up – doesn't give up on surly teenagers or family members with addictions or mental illnesses or disabilities or on parents who no longer remember who we are. We love anyway, just like God does. In the family we experience love that transcends differences, love that doesn't change even for the brother who voted for *that* candidate or the child who rejects things that matter deeply to us – like my son who is an atheist. It turns out that doesn't change how much I love him at all. Who knew? God's love is like that. In the family we learn love that forgives and forgives and forgives. All this is what God's love is like. And, while I know that none of our families live up to this standard all the time and that some families miss the boat entirely, the fact remains that most people who have a glimmer of what this kind of love is like learned it in their family. That, I think, is the purpose of this great gift of God, and why should celebrate the family.

But even when it works, family isn't enough. It's a laboratory for learning love, but now we're supposed to take what we learned in the lab out into the rest of the world. Family is the practice field, and now it's time for the game. If we stay in our sheltered community of love and shut others out, we've missed the point. This is why Jesus told people to put family aside and

move on to the full kingdom of God. This is what he meant when he looked away from his mother and brothers and called *everyone* who listened to the word of God his family. Family is only a start, a foretaste, and Christ is about taking that taste of God's love to all the world. That's why a church that's all about supporting the "traditional family" or *any* one version of family is only *almost* Christian. Traditional family values aren't enough, which is why Christ explicitly rejected them. What the church should be is a new kind of family, made up of all the loose parts of society, of every scruffy reject, every button-down traditionalist, and every cross-eyed cross-cultural cross-dressing outsider, creating from those ingredients a place of unconditional love that is bigger than any "traditional" family could ever be.

A year or so back I mentioned in a sermon the Church of All Sinners and All Saints in Denver, Colorado. The way that church started is this. A woman named Nadia Bolz-Weber graduated from a Lutheran Seminary, ready for her first full-time placement as a pastor. Now Rev. Bolz-Weber is tattooed on every visible surface of her body, except in the places where she's pierced, and, by her own description "swears like a trucker." For these reasons, among others, she and her bishop had some difficulty imagining the suburban Lutheran congregation of ethnic Norwegians that would be exactly the right fit for her. So she went to inner city Denver and started a church where she would fit. The Church of All Sinners and All Saints is made up of wounded people, people with every addiction under the sun, people with mental illnesses, people of every gender identity that you can imagine (and then a few), street people, and every other sort of misfit. And the little church started to grow.

I heard Reverend Bolz-Weber tell the following story in a radio interview. The church, in all its unusual glory, held an Easter Sunrise service in a park, and the Denver newspaper wrote a feature on it. Shortly after that article, a new group of visitors began to come to the church. Nice suburban people were driving into the inner city to see what this was about, and a lot of them were coming back. Then some of them expressed the desire to join. Rev. Bolz-Weber didn't know what to do. As she put it, "I was afraid they would mess with our weird."

So the church held a meeting to decide whether they would accept these new members. Now first of all, I think that's wonderful. I can think of nothing that would do more good for a group of white suburban professionals with a comfortable income (like most of us) than to wait outside while a church votes on whether they want to welcome "people like them." Rev. Bolz-Weber called the meeting to order, and the first person who stood up to speak was Matt, a young transgender man. Matt said simply, "I like them. They treat me the way I wish my parents had." And that was it. They took a vote and welcomed their new members.

That's what Christian family values look like. Not *Almost* Christian. The real thing.

A Final Word: Robert Frost's "The Death of the Hired Man" tells about the return of shiftless, good-for-nothing field hand, Silas, to the farm couple that sometimes has hired him before. The man doesn't want to take him back, remembering the last time Silas wandered off leaving his work undone, and the woman says that she thinks Silas has come home to die. "Home?" the man exclaims, then adds, cynically,

'Home is the place where, when you have to go there,
They have to take you in.'

And the woman replies,

‘I should have called it
Something you somehow haven’t to deserve.’

That’s it. That’s what we’re supposed to learn from family. You don’t have to deserve God’s love. It just is. Welcome home.