

Sermon Given By Rev. Dr. Rodney Kennedy  
Sunday, June 6, 2021

Second Sunday after Pentecost  
Sermon: "Jesus and Family Values"  
Gospel: Mark 3:20-35

I believe in family values! As with all beliefs, explanation required. When American Christians concocted the toxic brew of politics and moralism, as if they were working an illegal whiskey still in the piney woods of Louisiana, they invented a term "family values." Don't be confused. It is a political weapon; it is the rally cry of the "culture wars." Would Jesus attend a "Family Values" conference? Yes, and Jesus would say, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Look, family life has always been messy. There are more kinds of families than there are varieties of toothpaste on the shelves at CVS. Right off the bat, Cain and Abel – brother kills brother. Jacob and Esau. Hagar a single woman with a child alone in the desert. If we are going to believe in family values, then we are going to find ways to provide resources to single mothers like Hagar who wander in the wilderness of city streets with an overwhelming cloud of lack.

Look at King David and his children, especially Absalom. David, the betrayed father, mourning the son who perished making war against him, cries out to God, "My son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom!" (2 Samuel 19). King David was the most powerful and most successful man in the world. He was a man after God's own heart, but his relationships with his children gave him a broken heart. How can the church help fathers and mothers understand the tragedy of giving too much time to work, career, money, and material goods? Richard Layard: "As Western societies have gotten richer; their people have become no happier" (2005:3).

Family life is still, as God says to the Devil in Burke's *The Rhetoric of Religion*, "It's complicated." In the movie, "The Well of Loneliness," Tori writes a letter to her mother: "Dear Mummy, I hate you for multiple reasons, the most recent one being because you went on and on about my teeth at Easter in front of all your gross friends. You want me to be like your perfect junior league girl, and grow up to do charity balls and be the concubine for some banker, like you. But the truth of it is I am like addicted to you like chocolate. I always want to be around you. I'm some like stupid little puppy and you keep like kicking my teeth in with your words and your tone. Sometimes I wish you were dead." (Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*).

For example, male pastors can be unaware of how unbearable it can be for women pastors to live in a world of “maleness” even though the denomination ordains women and calls women to be pastors. 84% of Presbyterian women pastors report a feeling of discrimination. For example, there can be an unawareness of how unbearable it can be to live in a world of “straight happiness” – the world of happy heterosexual couples. There’s a cost for this happy heterosexuality and a violence within it that we never notice. Even when we accept gays, we still do little to change the dominant metaphor that happiness happens only within the parameters of a straight culture.

A place at the family table can come at a high price. Recognition for those not considered part of the straight crowd may come as a strange kind of gift, an act of hospitality that makes it clear that you are welcome, but you are still not really a member of the family. You are still treated as guests in the house. “In such a world you are asked to be grateful for the bits and pieces that you are given.” To be a guest is to be polite, to stay in your place, to not expect too much, to be on your best behavior, and if you violate this implied agreement, you could be expelled or treated as less than an equal. This is how some straight people have dealt with gays. This is even how some churches have treated new church members. I was pastor of a church where it was painfully obvious that the folks who had been there for more than forty years, were considered a higher class of member than folks who had joined in the last few years. When I started recommending new members for positions on boards and committees, there was a lot of tension.

There are times when the “ties that bind” are not really binding. When a woman named Edith is in a relationship with another woman named Abby, she is not allowed to see Abby as she is dying in the hospital. The reason: “Only family are allowed.” They ask Edith if she is family and she replies, “I am a friend, a very good friend.” She is excluded from the sphere of intimacy; she is a nonrelative, or nonfamily. Friend, at the hospital disappears because family ties are the only ties that are binding. This means that Abby dies alone; it means Edith waits all night, alone. Here friendship is a lesser tie, a tie that is not binding, that does not endure in matters of life and death. According to the law, to policy, to even unwritten rules, only family counts as if other relationships are not real. Almost no one notices that in this world, Edith becomes a “nonrelative,” unrelated. She becomes not. She is alone in her grief. She is left waiting. Alone. (Material paraphrased from Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*).

The complexities and challenges of family life make the words of Jesus critical for us. “Do the will of God and you are family.” Even more to the point, “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26).

Jesus' biological family thought he was crazy, and they came to take him home. The new family Jesus was creating required a new kind of allegiance. We are family. We are brothers and sisters. It changes everything, including how we treat one another. We can fuss but we are not allowed to be unforgiving. We can raise hell with one another, but we are expected to reconcile.

Guess what? In his dying gasps, Jesus, hanging on a cross, kept building his new family. "When Jesus saw his mother and the disciple whom he loved standing beside her, he said to his mother, 'Woman, here is your son.' Then he said to the disciple, 'Here is your mother.' And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home."

Jesus says mother and not father. Chances are Jesus was raised by a single mother. His family is centered in a matriarch and not a patriarch. In a land that is only hesitantly coming to grips with male domination and oppression these are not easy words to hear. Nothing is more distasteful about the "family values" issue than its patriarchal, hyper-masculine authority.

Why is there all this opposition to the role of women in the life of the church? Why is there so much anger about gay marriage? Our culture operates on the metaphor of the Strict Father as the head of the family. "The Strict Father" metaphor has imprisoned families for centuries. (George Lucas, *The Political Mind*). This metaphor controls much of American ideology.

Many Americans have mapped the Strict Father metaphor onto their politics and religion. The strict father is the moral leader of the family and must be obeyed. He has to protect the family from evil because Mother can't do it. He has to win competitions to support the family. You need a strict father because people don't know right from wrong and need Daddy to make them straighten up and fly right. People need to be punished strictly and painfully when they do wrong. Without a strong father figure there will not be any discipline. There can be no gays in the strict father family. The strict father must be heterosexual. Sexual issues are thus a threat to the very being of this family.. The key components of this metaphor are authority, obedience, discipline, and punishment all wrapped in one red, white, and blue package. The Strict Father model still haunts our churches.

In contrast, Jesus offers the nurturing mother model. He even refers to himself, as he weeps for Jerusalem, as a mother hen wanting to gather her brood under her protecting wings. Jesus' family doesn't have gender restraints. The key components of this model: empathy, compassion, responsibility for others, and the strength to carry out those responsibilities. When this model is mapped onto the nation, the result is protection, empowerment, community, mutual care for the common good, and compassion for the least of these.

Put me down as a family values preacher using the Jesus model. Jesus gave his life to create the “new family.” If you are a member of a non-traditional family, Jesus has gathered you under the sheltering wings of the mother hen. This means the church will help all families deal with the crushing pressures of this world. I support families that are crying out, “I am weary with my moaning; every night I flood my bed with tears; I drench my couch with my weeping. My eyes waste away because of grief” (Psalm 6:6 – 7a). I want to be there for the kinds of families who “are persecuted, through no fault of their own, have been set apart from the day of their birth, deprived of all sympathy, all understanding” (Ahmed, 96).

*Words tumble out of my mind now and I feel like a raging river where the dirt dam has broken, and the words come hurtling out:*

Feeding every hungry child is family values.  
Housing the homeless, especially single mothers with children, is family values.  
Supporting the education of all children is family values.  
Supporting immigrant and refugee communities is family values.  
Helping families with more debts than income.  
Senior adults struggling to stay in their homes.  
Increasing support and programs for the poor is family values.  
Adopting children without parents is family values.  
Working with organizations dedicated to helping poor families educate, feed, and provide for their children is family values.  
Making this world a family that protects women, children, and men and encourages their development is family values.  
Supporting gay parents.

One afternoon, I was walking down the hall of a nursing home, and I was trying to take my mind off how awful the place was – not clean and with a distinct bad smell. I was trying to sing “Amazing Grace” out loud. Suddenly, I heard another voice, a sweet, pure, lyrical voice, rising far above mine. I came around a corner and an African American woman who was every bit a 100 years old had joined my rendition. She was singing with me and drowning out, thankfully, my pitiful effort at song. When a woman can still sing “Amazing Grace” with that much power and grace in a place like that, there’s still hope for all of us. As we ended on the last verse, she smiled and said, “Bless you brother. Keep practicing. You may get it one day!”

So put me down as a family values preacher in the name of Jesus who said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” And may Jesus put us all down as family values people who may get it one day. Amen!