

“Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel: 3) Family Values”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

Two years ago the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) General Assembly, meeting in Denver, Colorado, received a report, entitled “Living Faithfully With Families in Transition.” The report correctly notes that we are living in a time in which there is enormous change within the family systems of this country. Today it is not unusual to find children not only living in homes with a mother and father who are married to each other, it is also common to find many children living in homes with a single parent, stepparent, or a man and a woman who are living together but who are not married to each other. Moreover, there is an increasing number of what today are sometimes called “blended families.” It is also common today to find unmarried single women

who have children either by natural birth or adoption. It is also becoming increasingly common to find homosexual couples that have adopted children.

The report concludes that “church and social policies should not discriminate among these families, but support all such families equally.” Surely all families should be accepted and treated with dignity. But having said that, there are those who have questioned whether the policy placed before the Presbyterian Church goes far enough.

Dr. Don Browning, a professor at the University of Chicago, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* raises the question of whether the Presbyterian Church should go beyond simply acceptance and support.

Don Browning points out that in fact the report does not tell the whole story with regard to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). In spite of many efforts at “diversity” and “inclusivity” in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) the demographics of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) remain what they have been for 200 years. Although racial ethnic groups make up approximately twenty percent of the population of this nation, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is ninety-six percent white. Presbyterians, Browning notes, are generally better educated and richer than most Americans. Three-fourths are currently married; only nineteen percent have experienced divorce. These are far higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates than the nation as a whole.

“Then,” notes Browning, “the report says something quite revealing: “Most Presbyterians...were once children in white or black middle and upper income families of the 1950s and have been able to repeat that family form for themselves. In short, most Presbyterians have pretty much done what their parents and grandparents did years ago: they got educated, got married, and had children, and to a greater degree than the rest of the population, mothers stayed home with children, in part because they could afford to. When divorce happens, or a baby is born out of wedlock, tradition, education, and income have generally given Presbyterians the cultural capital to manage the effects.

Browning concludes by saying that not every group in our society has been as fortunate as we have--particularly the poor. By minimizing the consequences of divorce and illegitimacy the report is silent at the point it should be most forceful, and loudest at the point it should be more silent. In the end, it is not much more than an example of how elitism can silently march under the banner of inclusiveness.

I.

During the Sundays of Lent we have examined the theme of Discipleship in Mark’s Gospel. We began with the subject of “Following Jesus.” Last week we spoke about the “Hard Cost of Forgiveness.” This morning we will focus on the issue of “Family Values.”

One of the most puzzling aspects of the New Testament is the relationship of Jesus to his family. In fact, there is very little we know about Jesus’ family or even the thirty years of his

early life before his ministry began. The Gospels are quite insistent that Jesus had brothers and sisters. In the gospel of Matthew we find an occasion where Jesus returns to his hometown of Nazareth. The crowd that has gathered around Jesus says: “Is this not the carpenter’s son? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? And are not his sisters with us?” (Matthew 13: 54-58; see also Mark 6:3).

It appears that at first the brothers and sisters of Jesus may have been unbelievers. But after the death and resurrection of Jesus something changed. The Book of Acts and I Corinthians mention Jesus’ brothers as members of the early church (see Acts 1:14 and I Corinthians 9: 5).

Moreover, the New Testament is very silent about the father of Jesus, Joseph. After Jesus’ birth we never encounter Joseph again. Most New Testament scholars believe that Jesus’ father died sometime before Jesus’ public ministry.

The situation with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is very different. She, unlike his disciples and his siblings, seems to sense that there is something very different about this child she carried in her womb. When the angels announced his birth, we read, “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart” (Luke 2: 19). When she was at a wedding in Cana of Galilee and the wine ran out, she said to the servants that had gathered about her son, “Do whatever he commands you” (John 2: 5). As she watched her son die on a cross, Jesus commanded his disciple John to care for his mother (John 19: 25-27).

But no matter how you look at these few brief references of Jesus and his family, it is hard not to conclude that Jesus was always conscious of a higher loyalty than the loyalty to family. When he was twelve years old, he went with his mother and father along with other families from Nazareth to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. On the way home his parents discovered him missing. After several days of frantic searching for Jesus they found him in the Temple conversing with the leading religious figures of his day (Luke 2:41-52). When his mother confronted him with the fact that his parents had been searching desperately for him, Jesus replied by saying, “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” So, given the witness of the New Testament, what are we to say about faith and family?

II.

In the first place, the New Testament makes it clear to us that the call to follow Jesus Christ is a call that takes precedent over every other loyalty. On one occasion, when Jesus called a man to follow him, the man objected that he had to bury his father. Jesus replied, “Follow me, and let the dead bury the dead” (Matthew 8:22).

This past week I received a book written by William Sloan Coffin, entitled *Credo*. It is a collection of sayings from sermons, speeches, and books that Coffin wrote. I can honestly say that I have never known a minister quite like William Sloan Coffin. He was an activist minister who in the early 1960s was part of a group of Civil Rights protesters who were called “Freedom Riders.” They rode on buses from the north to the south, protesting segregation in the south.

Many of them were beaten by mobs and some were killed. During the Vietnam war Coffin was one of the most visible and vocal opponents of the American presence in Vietnam.

William Sloan Coffin was the Chaplain of Yale University in the 1960s and during the 1970s. In the early 1980s he was minister of the Riverside Church of New York City. I remember visiting the Riverside Church some years ago, when Coffin was the minister. As he began his sermon, it was obvious that the week before had been a tumultuous week in the church. Shortly before our visit Nelson Rockefeller, a former Vice President of the United States, had died. John D. Rockefeller, Jr. built the Riverside Church in New York and the family had wanted to have the funeral service at the Church, even though none of the family were members there at the time. The situation had been further complicated by the fact that the family had requested the Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, to deliver a eulogy at the service. Coffin told us that morning that he and many members of the church had been opposed to the Vietnam War and that many members of the church's governing body objected to Kissinger's presence in the church, not only because he was a supporter of the war, but also his presence as Secretary of State meant that there would be Secret Service agents in the church carrying machine guns.

Coffin confessed to those of us who were worshipping there that weekend that, as the minister of the church, he was in quite a dilemma trying to negotiate between the Rockefeller family and the members of his church. He confided that as the Senior Minister he felt he needed to put his foot down. He just didn't know where to put it. Finally, he said, he decided to stand up against the Rockefeller family and insist that there be no cash bar in the Narthex of the church.

William Sloan Coffin knew that being a disciple of Jesus meant taking risks. On one occasion he noted that "Love of country, like love of parents, is never to be equated with blind obedience, as Jesus himself in both cases so poignantly demonstrated."

III.

But while it is true that the New Testament insists that loyalty to God takes priority over every other loyalty, it is also true that the New Testament understands that there is something essential in the human family and that the Christian faith has an essential stake in the home. All our Christian ideals are family ideals and most of our language is the language of the family. Whenever we call God our Father or refer to all people as the "children of God" we are using the language of the family. Throughout the Old and New Testament there are a number of amazing passages that remind us of this dimension of our faith:

"As a mother comforts her child," writes the prophet Isaiah, "so I will comfort you."
"As a father has compassion for his children," writes the Psalmist, "so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him."

One of the things about my mother that always endeared her to her family was her great love of wildflowers. After my father's death some years ago she spent a great deal of her time hiking in the mountains of East Tennessee and Western North Carolina. She gave each one of her

grandchildren a small magnifying glass and an introductory book on wildflowers. Even to this day all of her nine grandchildren can identify certain wildflowers and all of them have a love of flowers because someone cared enough about them to share that love with them.

At some level all of us are aware that the future of our community and our nation is inexorably linked to the future of the family in this country.

It was John Ruskin who once observed about the city of Venice, “the decline of her political prosperity was exactly coincident with that of the decline of domestic and individual religion.”

May God give us wisdom and courage for the living of these days!