

“Family Religion”

a sermon by

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Text: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice, and now, I am sure, dwells in you”(II Timothy 1:5).

Many of you are aware that in the Episcopal or Anglican tradition the liturgy of the church often contains a number of responses where the congregation is called to respond to the words of the priest or liturgist. For example, often in the Anglican tradition the priest greets the congregation with the words: “The Lord be with you”. To which the congregation responds, “And with you as well.”

N. T. Wright, a New Testament scholar as well as the Bishop of Durham, England, recently told of an Anglican bishop who stood in front of a congregation. As so often happens to public speakers, he was struggling with one of the small microphones that many times do not work. He blurted out, “There is something wrong with this microphone,” to which the congregation dutifully responded, “And with you as well.”

I.

It is hard to speak about the family in this nation today without the realization that there are many serious problems that threaten the family system in our country. Divorce rates continue

to be very high, the number of children born out of wedlock continues to soar, and the number of children in our school system living in single parent homes is frighteningly high.

That point was brought home to me some weeks ago in an interview our Scholarship Committee had with a young seminary student from Richmond, Virginia. He and his wife are currently living in an old part of the city of Richmond called Church Hill. It is an impoverished area with a largely African-American population. This young couple decided to live in this neighborhood and is responsible for a remarkable ministry there with the children of the neighborhood. One of the things that he said to our group was that he and his wife were the only married family in the neighborhood. In every other home there were adults living together or more frequently single parent households. This seminary student said that one of the things that fascinated the young children in the neighborhood was the idea of a man and a woman actually being married and having children. Most of the children had never seen a married couple with children.

I.

Anyone who is familiar with the New Testament understands that the Biblical faith places a great deal of importance on the home. II Timothy is a case in point. It is a part of the so-called "Pastoral Epistles," which include I Timothy, II Timothy, and Titus.

For a number of years there has been a debate as to whether these letters were written by the Apostle Paul or whether they were in fact written by a later hand, perhaps a disciple of Paul. In more recent years many scholars have returned to the traditional view that Paul was the author of these letters.

There are certainly a lot of indications that this letter reflects the last years of Paul's life. It is clear from this letter that Paul is in prison in Rome. He notes that the time for his death is not far away. "He has fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith" (II Timothy 4:7). He also notes that winter is approaching and he asks Timothy to bring to him his cloak, his books and the parchments or letters that were dear to him (II Timothy 4:13)

One of the remarkable aspects of this Epistle is the family references that are present within it. In his opening greeting Paul makes reference to this young man Timothy's faith and then notes that it was a faith that first dwelt in Timothy's grandmother, Lois, and was also present in Timothy's mother, Eunice, and is alive now in Timothy.

One of the striking things about this passage is that there is no mention of Timothy's father. We don't know much about him. Either he was not alive or he was not involved in Timothy's education in the faith. It is not insignificant that the absence of a father--a major problem in our society today--was also a factor in the early church.

II.

So let us be clear. The church has a stake in the home. So much of the language of our faith is language of the home. One of the ways that the Bible speaks of God is in the language of a parent. "As a father has compassion for his children," writes the Psalmist, "so the Lord has compassion for those who fear him" (Psalm 103:13). "As a mother comforts her children," notes Isaiah, "so I will comfort you, says the Lord" (Isaiah 66: 13).

Throughout the Old and New Testaments there are images drawn from the family. The prophet Hosea compares the rebellious people of Israel to an unfaithful wife. The New Testament understands God as the father of all people and insists that we are all children of God.

In the Presbyterian Church we define the church as believers and their children. We baptize infants to acknowledge that by birth or adoption they are members of the church. The young people who will be confirmed today are not joining the church. They are members by birth. They are, however, making an important step in their own journey of faith as they become confirmed as members of the church.

Moreover, the home is the place where the faith of the church is handed from generation to generation. John Calvin, in speaking of the Christian life, placed a great deal of emphasis on the home. For Calvin there were certain things that Christian families could and should do. This included the saying of grace at meals, the reading of Scripture, family prayers, regular attendance at worship and the stewardship of one's time and money.

One of the gifts that my mother imparted to her children and to her grandchildren was the love of wildflowers. After the death of my father some years ago, my mother took an intense interest in wildflowers. For many years she led wildflower tours in Eastern Tennessee and in Western North Carolina. She gave to each of her grandchildren a small magnifying glass and a book of wildflowers. Each of them today can still identify a Trillium, a Jack in the Pulpit, and a Lady's Slipper. She instilled in each one a love of flowers, not by teaching them about wildflowers, but by sharing with them a love of wildflowers.

That is true with faith as well. Most of us learned about the faith not so much by instruction, but from someone who passed that love to us. Take, for example, the notion of the sacredness of personality. This is one of the most fundamental teachings of Jesus. He taught that all people were important. He associated with the outcasts of his society: tax collectors, prostitutes, lepers--people who others had given up on. Jesus taught that every person had worth.

Now try to teach that concept to a child. Set a child down and try to teach it. Get the matter placed out logically. Arrange the corollaries neatly and systematically. All personality is sacred.

How much will a child learn that way? What a child learns about the sacredness of personality he or she will chiefly absorb from the home, particularly from the way that his parents live with each other, with those with whom they come in contact; particularly those of other colors, other races, other classes

Tomorrow evening our church will gather with other churches in our Presbytery to hear Professor Timothy Tyson speak about the book he wrote, entitled *Blood Done Called My Name*. It is a story about racial divide in Oxford, North Carolina. It is an important story and an important event. Now most of us would agree that there have been many strides in racial reconciliation of the past decades. But many of us would also argue that we still have a long way to go to rid ourselves of the terrible legacy of racial segregation on our society.

III.

Then, too, the church has a stake in the home for yet another reason and that part of the mission of the church is the strengthening and encouragement of its families and particularly its children. One of the most critical aspects of this church's mission is its ministry of Christian education to its children and youth. That certainly includes the school of the church, but it includes the Weekday School and the Child Development Center as well. Each day there are 350 children who are a part of these two programs. Both are vital to the educational ministry of our church.

Several years ago the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) meeting in Denver, Colorado, received a report entitled "Living Faithfully With Families in Transition." The Report noted some of the radical changes in the family structure that are a part of our society today. There are many single people who have adopted or borne children. There are homosexual couples that have adopted children. There are blended families, adopted families, and families with a stepparent. The report concluded that the church should not discriminate among these families but support all such families equally.

Surely all families should be accepted and treated with dignity. But one wonders if acceptance and fair treatment is enough. Dr. Don Browning, who for a number of years taught at the University of Chicago, wrote a remarkable article in the Wall Street Journal that was entitled "Inclusive Without Consequences," in which he raised some important issues. He notes that the report does point out that Presbyterians hold an enviable position in this country. For the most part, we are better educated and wealthier than most Americans. The report goes on to say that three-fourths of the members of our churches are married, and only 19 percent have experienced divorce. These are far higher marriage rates and lower divorce rates than the nation as a whole.

But then, as Browning notes, the report notes something very remarkable. "Most Presbyterians," the report states, "were once children in white, middle and upper income families of the 1950s and have been able to repeat that pattern for ourselves. In short, most of us have done what our parents did. We received an education, got married, and then had children. Now, my mother and father did not sit down with my brother, my sister, and me and explain to us the importance of this order. But they did not have to. It was assumed. You finish college, get married, and then have children. It seems simple enough, but when these steps are not followed in that order, some disastrous consequences can follow. In other words, Presbyterians, for the most part, fared better than many other groups because we taught the values of marriage, family, and education."

Last winter, as I made my way home one evening, I saw a giant oak tree on Queens Road West that had been blown down by a winter storm. That is what happens when a tree's root system is not adequate for the branches that are above the ground.

The same is true with our lives and with our families as well --too much strain, not enough tenacity; too much activity, not enough faith.

John Ruskin once wrote on the downfall of the city of Venice, "The decline of her political prosperity was exactly coincident with the decline of domestic and individual religion."

Is there any more important faith than the faith that is being taught in our homes?

Amen!