

"MAKING A FAMILY"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 8, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

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"During those times in the night when you woke up and faced reality, did you go through a major depression? Did you ever want to die or to pull the plug?"

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Then my three kids came in...besides Will, I've got Alexandra, who's 12 and Matthew, 16. And I asked myself, 'How can I possibly leave them?' Of course I've had moments of feeling sorry for myself. I look at pictures of our boat and at people who can walk up stairs and I think I've been dealt a lousy hand. But thru it all, I never had any thoughts of suicide."

One wonders: where does Superman draw his strength? From his wife and from his children....I'm sure that's a big part of it....but what does it take to make a family...in today's world. I want us to think about that this morning.

DEVELOPMENT

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"Your mother and brothers are outside looking for You". He replied, "Who are My mother and My brothers?" And then He looked at those seated in a circle around Him and He said, "Here are My mother and My brothers....whoever does the will of God is My brother and sister and mother".

FAMILY PROBLEMS

When I first bumped into that line back in my teenage years, it came across to me as being a bit cold. And then as I got older and saw a bit more of life I came to realize that families can have tensions and problems. One thinks of the family strife back there in the pages of the Old Testament. Cain and Able. Noah and his family. Jacob and Esau. David and his son. But Jesus? Were there problems in the family of Jesus?

If Jesus and his family were experiencing a bit of family tension, it ought to take the rest of us off the hook...at least a little bit. I think it is true that all families have their headaches and heartaches. Why, just having a family is a challenge! I read about a father who fearing an earthquake in the region of his home sent his two boys to stay with a distant friend until the threat of the earthquake was over. A few weeks later, the same father received a letter from his friend that said, "Please....take your boys home and send me the earthquake!"

Some present, I'm sure, can sympathize. Children can be challenging...children of any age. Remember that comic strip, "For Better Or For Worse" from a couple of yeears back. The first three segments show the mother tossing and turning in her bed, worrying about their son, Michael. She says,

"Are we too tough on Michael? Or, are we not tough enough? Do we give in too often? Too seldom? Do we listen to him? Do we understand? Maybe I nag too much. Am I a good parent? Where are the answers? How does one know what to do?"

And then in the last box we see Michael lying awake in his bed....saying,

"The trouble with grown-ups is they think they know it all!"

Parents don't know everything...especially when it comes to raising children. And that's what makes it so difficult. So much of family life is a bit of trial and error. Most parents I know do the very best they can and then pray that it's going to be enough. Having a family is not easy. All families have problems. If Jesus had a problem or two in His family, then I guess you and I can expect to have some problems and tensions, too...working MOMS and helping to keep families afloat financially have brought new pressures on families and a bit of guilt, too.

A year ago, Parents Magazine, ran a feature article by freelance writer, Terry Williams, in which she asked fifty mothers what they would do differently if given another opportunity to rasia their children. This is what three moms said,

"One mother of a three year old would have chosen only one child care book to follow....rather than be confused by advice given in the dozens she now owns. Another young mother would have switched her pediatrician sooner, having endured his disapproval for too many years. Her present doctor thinks she is a good mother. And finally, a working

mother of two would have made herself immune to the guilt feelings she developed when others criticized how she raised her children."

JESUS REDEFINED WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A FAMILY

Moving on, the second thing that we observe in today's

Biblical text is that Jesus redefined what it means to be a family.

A family is not so much defined by its bloodlines but by the love and the respect that members have for one another. Think of it this way. Mutual commitment is more important than shared genes. Jesus asked those sitting around and standing there in that circle, "Who are My brothers and sisters...who is My mother?" And then He looked at those there in that gathering and said, "Here are My mother and My brothers!" In other words, Jesus was expanding the concept of family beyond the concept of blood kin. Perhaps biology is a small part of parenting.

A major concern or worry in adoptive families is "what happens when our child starts asking about his or her biological parents?" I know of adoptive children who have spent years tracking down their "so-called" natural parents. Granted, it's a strong urge....but still...it must be said that biology is not the most important part of a family relationships. Some will even say it's the least important. True, almost anyone can produce a child. But it takes a person of deep commitment to truly parent a child.

Your family consists of those persons who have committed themselves to be there for you. Maybe these are persons who were responsible for bringing you into the world, and maybe not. Adoptive parents can be your true parents in every sense of the word. And for that matter, you can be living with your biological parents and one day discover the sad truth that they are not truly committed to you.

We've all been touched by the tragic murder of Comedian Bill Cosby's son, Ennis. Few Americans are admired as much as Bill Cosby...particularly as a father. His successful television program was a sitcom based on his own family and we've all admired the agonies and the ecstasies of that family. But Bill Cosby wasn't always committed to his family. Like many a young father he had to grow into his role as a "family man". Time magazine quoted him as saying that "as recently as 1979 if somebody had made him choose between career and family, he probably would have left his family occupy second place". But something happened and he doesn't say what....to cause him to shift his priorities. After "rededicating" himself to wife and kids, he said,

"I just asked my wife and my kids to forgive me...and ever since then, they've been a part....a big part...of everything I do".

We all know of parents who might consider making that same kind of rededication. A major financial magazine interviewed "100 most successful executives" in the country. Most revealed a healthy devotion to family and embraced family values, but comments from one man who made this "top 100" said,

"Reaching the level of business success that I have requires total commitment. If you family is too demanding, then get a new family...that's what I did..."

Amazing, but not all that rare. There are many walk-away parents in this world and some who do not walk away physically, do so psychologically and that's why it's so refreshing to read about parents who are committed to their kids.

Elaine Milsark, writing in a recent issue of Today's Christian Woman, told the reader of her dad in these words.

"When I was growing up, my dad worked long hours and had to miss most of my school activities...but when I joined the High School band, he said he'd be there for every game. And he was true to his word....until one Friday night in my Senior Year...his flight home from a business trip was landing 50 miles away at game time. I knew that mom would be alone in the field stands. Yet, as the band marched on to the muddy field in the pouring rain, I happened to look outside the fence and noticed a figure in a wet trench coat holding a dripping umbrella over his head. I knew at a glance it was my dad. He'd arrived at the stadium just before half-time. It was too late to buy a ticket, but that didn't prevent him from keeping his promise. He was there...just like he said he'd be. And it's still that way with my dad. He's always been true to his word!"

GOOD PEOPLE MAKE GOOD PARENTS

He always kept his promises to her and that brings us to the final observation from this text. It has to do with the role of character in the family. And Jesus said, "Whoever does God's will...is My brother and sister and mother." Put this down then as the final point of today's sermon. Good people make good parents. And people of questionable character are apt to make questionable parents.

Kimberly E. Davis tells how her brother once snooped through their father's desk drawers. Instead of coming across some dark secret....a friend had found some pornographic material in a similar hunt....David (her brother) found his father's prayer journal. And on just about every page was David's name....and that proof of their father's integrity (says Kimberly)....that he was as he appeared...affected her brother deeply. I have a feeling that this may be where some parents fail...at the level of their personal character. Their implicit messages to their children is apt to be, "Do what I say...not what I do". And let's face it, that message has a hard time succeeding.

Good people make good parents. All families have their share of problems - headaches and heartaches....but if your family is built on character and on commitment then your chances of success are strong, indeed. I believe it! Lee Iacocca in his book, Straight Talk, has a paragraph that's worth sharing here in the closing moments. He writes,

"My father told me that the way way to teach is by example. He certainly showed me what it took to be a good person and a good citizen. As the old joke has it, 'No one ever said on his deathbed, I should have spent more time on my business.'

Throughout my life, the bottom line I've worried about most was that my kids turn out all right. The only rock I know that stays steady....the only institution I know that works, is the family. I was brought up to believe in it. And I do.

Because I think a civilized world can't remain civilized for long if its foundation is built on anything but the family. A city, state or country can't be any more than the sum of its vital parts....millions of family units. You can't have a country or a city or a state that's worth anything unless you govern within yourself in your day-to-day life. It all starts at home."

To me, that's very well spoken. It all starts in the home. And even Superman will tell you that!

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these moments, O God....as we reflect upon the high calling of making a family. Help us to re-dedicate ourselves to the tasks involved in this high calling. At times it is difficult and problems and tensions surface. In this episode from the Gospel, we see Jesus redefining what it means to be a family and how we called for greater love and respect in the larger family of humankind. Thankful for the love and respect we have found in our family, we ask this in the name and spirit of Christ, our Lord. Amen.

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