

Sermon: 'The Five Faces of the Family'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 14th March 11 am

LESSON: Psalm 68:1-6; Mark 3:31-35

A young couple from here in London got married,
she hated flying so they decided to go to the Suffolk coast for their honeymoon
and booked in to a romantic hotel with sea views.

On the first night of their honeymoon the new wife slipped into her special negligee
and got into bed,

but her husband stood on the balcony looking out to sea,

"Look at those boats out there fishing" he said.

"I'm cold" she said.

So he went to the wardrobe,
gave her a spare blanket,
and carried on looking out to sea.

"Do you know I can count three lighthouses flashing" he enthused,

"I'm so cold" she said.

So he put on his dressing gown,
left the room,
five minutes later he came back into the room with a hot water bottle,
then he carried on looking out to sea.

"Do you know I think the lifeboat's going out!" he exclaimed.

"I'm really cold" his new bride said,

"and when I was a little girl and cold like this my mother used to come and
get into bed with me to warm me up."

"Well!" he snorted,

"If you think I'm going back to London to collect your mother you've
another think coming!"

Family life is the butt of many jokes,
but the family we grew up in and the family we live in now can be a key factor
in shaping our happiness and the happiness of other family members,
and this morning I want us to think about the family.

Now the problem in a preacher talking about family life is that the preacher gives a wonderful and idealised view which strikes no cords at all and leaves everyone going home pretty depressed and guilty.

In fact there is nothing I hate more than some preacher standing up and telling us how one son is in the ministry,
another is a doctor who leads the youth fellowship,
and the daughter is about to become a research assistant for a Christian charity!

Now that's just great for them,
well done,

they've clearly done a great job in raising their children,
but for most of us our families are a bit of a mess.

We love them to bits but we just wish they would sort themselves out a bit,
we just wish they were not in that particular relationship with that particular person,
we just wish they shared the faith which is so important to us.

Many years ago I was speaking at a large Christian holiday week and Bidy and I led a session called,

"Families, struggling together."

We had been allocated quite a small room but loads of people turned up.

We thought we were struggling but when I chatted to some of the other parents,

especially the single parents,

I realised how hard it is to bring up families,

and that Christians do not find family life any easier than other people.

Then the background to all this is that in the twenty first century family life is changing as never before.

One reason is that social structures are changing,

my Mother stopped work when she got married,

Bidy worked until we had the children and then picked up work again as they grew older,

but most Mums these days have to work most of the time either because they are on their own or because they cannot afford not to.

The norm is no longer the Mother staying at home with the children,

instead there is a whole raft of interlocking child care in operation.

When we turn to our young people I am sure that you know that the age of puberty has dropped steadily in the last forty years,

our children are taller and heavier than they were,

and the sexualisation of children through the influence of the media is something which means that childhood seems to be over almost before it has started.

Medical science is another contributing factor.

Effective contraception and easily available abortion means that the parents,

more especially the Mother,
can choose the size of the family,
and in some nations parents are also making choices about continuing
pregnancies based upon the sex of the foetus.

Again looking overseas, in many countries it is illegal to smack a child,
and here in the United Kingdom I know of countless parents who have said to
me that they are reluctant to go to a Doctor or a Health visitor with some sorts
of problem with their children in case they are accused of abuse and the child
taken in to care.

I could go on and on but I am sure my point is clear,
there are a whole host of new pressures,
new norms,
new contexts,
for family life.

And you who are parents do not need me to tell you that.

It's a struggle bringing up children,
it's a struggle sorting out what are the right decisions for them,
it's a struggle as Christians standing for what we think to be right for our
children against peer group and media pressures.

Let me quote a psychiatrist writing about family life,
he says,
"From where I sit the picture of marriage and family life in present day society
is a gloomy one.
Family life seems to be cracking at the seams and an effective mortar is no-
where available".
Now I agree with that analysis,
but I do not agree with that conclusion,
and I want to say to you that there is an effective mortar available for
family life,
and that mortar is the love of God.

So let me borrow five headings from the late Edith Schaeffer's book on family life,
each one I hope of some help to parents,
and to all of us here who, even if we are not a parent, I am sure have some
sort of contact with family and friends who are.

First – The family starts with love.

In the Old Testament there is one of the most lovely and romantic love stories ever
told,
it is a story which would have been a best seller if it had been written in a
Mills and Boon novel,
it is the story of Jacob's love for Rachel.
Jacob had to work for seven years to marry Rachel,
he was then tricked by her father and had to work and wait another seven
years.
For fourteen years Jacob waited,
and the Bible tells us that they seemed to him to be "just a day" because he
loved her.

Love is the foundation of family life.
You parents may worry that you don't have the money to buy that computer
game or that special bike or to send your children on that school trip.
Now I know it seems hard at the time,
I remember when our Mary was one of just two children in her class not able
to go on a school trip because we were trying to live on a Methodist stipend
and we simply could not afford it.
Yes I know what it's like,
you feel dreadful,
but do you know in the long term it doesn't matter as much as you think,
what matters is whether or not you love your children and build a good
relationship with them.

I go into homes that have everything,
yet as I sit in that home there seems to be no love there.
I go in to other homes which seem very poor or very chaotic,

but it is a joy to share the life of that family because so clearly love is at the heart of who they are.

Whatever cultural or material disadvantage a child might face, if there is love there you give that child the best start in the world.

And just a word here to you who are the provider in one parent families, yes there are tremendous problems for the single parent in offering a balanced role model to the child, but let me assure you that a child is far better off with one parent where there is love than with two parents where there is no love!
The family starts with love.

Second - the family stays with effort.

When I was young one of my pin ups was the actress Britt Ekland. Soon after one of her several marriages she was interviewed and said to the interviewer,
"I know a lot of people didn't expect our relationship to last, but we've just celebrated our two month anniversary!"

Perhaps she needed to hear what someone else once said,
"Love does not consist of gazing at each other, but in looking together in the same direction."

As some here can testify I am horrible when I preach at weddings, because I always say to the couple standing there that although their wedding day is a fairy tale day there will be other days where they wonder why on earth they ever got married.
As the little ditty puts it,

"The eyes that over coffee,
looked so very sweet,
will not look so tender,
over Shredded Wheat!"

The deep glaze of first love will not cope with a dirty nappy, for the family stays together with effort.
When you answer the wedding vows you do not say in response, "I love."
You do not say,
"I might."
You do not say,
"I feel."
No, what you do say is,
"I will."

Love is not just about the heart it is also about the brain and the resolution and the will.

A family will only stay together with a great deal of effort,

family life is very hard work indeed,
there is no quick and easy way through,
the family stays with effort.

Third, the family stabilises with discipline.

A young minister once wrote a very popular pamphlet entitled
"Ten Commandments for bringing up children."

Some years later he got married and after a couple of years they had their
first child.

He had the pamphlet re-printed with the title,
"Ten suggestions for bringing up children."

When he and his wife had had three children he had it reprinted again with
the title,
"Ten hints for bringing up children."

When they had had five children he asked his publisher to withdraw it
completely!

Who runs your family?
Is it Mum or Dad?
Or is it in fact dear little Adam or sweet little Eve?

I wonder how many times you have stood in the queue for the checkout at the
Supermarket,
and there in front of you is a mother and child.

"Mum, can I have a bag of crisps?"
"No you can't, it's nearly teatime."

"But Mum, I feel hungry!"
"No you can't have one."

The child then starts to cry,
to stamp,
to throw a tantrum.
The dear old granny tut tuts,
the woman behind glares and disapproves,
the lady at the till can't concentrate upon what she is doing,
Mum grows increasingly flustered and finally picks up a packet of crisps.

All's quiet now,
everyone is happy,
but a pattern of behaviour is put in place which virtually guarantees that the
same thing will happen again the next time,
and the child will grow up into the woman or man who thinks that if they

make enough noise and enough fuss they will always get their own way.

We live in a time where respect for discipline is declining,
in school,
on the street,
in society in general,
but the respect for discipline which we all need is first set in the home,
to be a parent is a grave responsibility.

Only the parent can set the boundaries for the child.
Only the parent can control how much TV is watched, on which programmes.
Only the parent can set priorities and arrange the conditions where
homework is done properly.
Only the parent can set a pattern by their own personal behaviour which will
have a deep influence upon the child.
The child without a strong framework of discipline thinks that he or she is
free,
but then grows up to discover that they are enmeshed within a dragnet of
insecurity and ever changing values.

I would plead with you parents here today,
it may be hard, but review your attitude before God if you know you are not
providing that loving and strong and Godly framework,
for the family stabilises with discipline.

Fourth, the family stimulates with activity.

Edith Schaeffer writes that the family is,
"A recreation centre, where families can relax and enjoy each other."
You see a family can be a number of separate and different little worlds,
or it can be one world where a number of different insights are shared.

Here I feel that the family table is so important,
it doesn't matter how small your flat is you can manage to fit in a small table,
and then eat together.

In our family we have always tried to have at least one meal a day where everyone
who is in eats together.
Phones are not allowed,
reading is not allowed,
we talk together.
Now I have to say that when we are all together I am the quiet one in our
family,
I just sit and smile through the bedlam,
but that meal together helps keep us together,
insights are shared,
and that is a creative and stimulating time,
although to be honest it can sometimes also be a destructive and

argumentative time as well,
but even that is better than what I consider to be the anathema of family
life.

We see it in the TV series "The Royal Family,"
where the family sits in a line,
trays on laps,
watching the television.

Don't let it happen,
grit your teeth,
fight the battles,
work at really being together.

Fifth and last, the family stretches with Jesus

An old boy who was 90 went to the doctor for the very first time,
the doctor was amazed,
"This is quite remarkable" he enthused "I've never seen anyone of your age in
such a remarkable physical condition,
can you tell me your secret?"

"Well Doctor" said the old man,
"When we got married the parson said to me,
Now John, never have a cross word with your Edie,
if you feel like falling out just turn on your heel and take yourself out for a
walk in the countryside,
so you see doctor,
I've lived such a fine outdoor open air life that I've never ailed a thing!"

I doubt that is a true story,
but it makes a good point,
marriage and family life mean falling out to many people,
and we can't go off for walks in the countryside to avoid it.

Let me say to you that I have been very conscious as I have been speaking this
morning that for many of you the family was not a happy place,
or is not a happy place.

Perhaps you had an upbringing that was an unhappy one,
sadly many folk I meet in counselling situations tell me of their physical or
sexual or mental abuse which has left a lasting scar upon their life.

Or perhaps growing up was a time of great loneliness for you,
for in some families there is little love and little sharing,
only a series of individuals getting on with their life,
and home becomes a lonely and difficult place to be.

Or perhaps you had the joy of sharing a home of great and deep happiness,
but sickness and death came and destroyed it.

Or perhaps, still sadder in some ways,
what you had and what you treasured was lost when your partner walked out
for another leaving so many questions and so much hurt.

I fully realise that for some of you to even think about the family is a painful
thing which leaves you with a dull ache at the very centre of your being.

For others here this morning the struggles of the family are not in the past they are in
the here and now.

The financial struggle as children need to be fed and clothed and there is just not
much money around.

The pressures of work making so many demands upon you,
with one or both partners coming home so tired and stressed that rows flair
up so easily and there is no energy for anything creative.

The problems of the physical side of a relationship,
how a relationship is sexually is something we seem to seldom mention in
Church,
thus you assume it's just you,
that nobody else has your problem,
whilst night after night harsh words are spoken and tears are shed.

The bitterness of the affair,
it is said that six out of ten woman and seven out of ten men are unfaithful at
some time in their marriage.

Family life is perhaps even this morning causing you such stress and worry and pain.

Then as I have mentioned the tough time of the single parent,
doing all she or he can,
but feeling it is just not enough.

Also obviously there are many of you who are not parents,
not in a relationship,
for you the right person has not come along,
and it may well be that you are quite happy and fulfilled in your singleness,
or it may well be that you wish every day that you were not single.

When we come to Church we talk glibly of the family,
we paint a lovely picture of Mum and Dad and two smiling children,
but when we do that we are selling ourselves short because we are not dealing
with reality,
the reality is that family life is messy,

that family life is a mixture of joy and laughter and blessing,
along with struggle and compromise and pain.

Well let me say to you that the family stretches with Jesus,
Jesus said that

"Whoever does God's will is my brother and my sister and my mother."

Jesus wants to be your brother,
there is just one stipulation here,
we are to do what God wants us to do.

And what does God want us to do?

All God wants is that we love Him,
and we love one another.

Your parents may have let you down in the past,
but God will never let you down.

Your family may well not have been a very creative or happy place to be,
but the family to which God calls us,
this family of the Church,
is such a broad one and such an open one and such a generous one that you
will find your place within it and also find in it great strength and love.

The family stretches with Jesus,
the love of Jesus can meet with you now,
can transform the hurts you carry from the past,
can make such a difference to your family life in the present,
and can link you in to this equally messy family we call the Church.

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