

**The Changing Face of America's Families (IV):
A Family for All**

A Sermon by Louise F. Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
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Text: Acts 4:32-35

The philosophers (and married couple) Will and Ariel Durant assessed “family” as the “nucleus of civilization,” the creative, life-nourishing center of human communities. During this sermon series, we have observed how the definition of family has changed across the span of human history, and the multiple and varied purposes it has served. We’ve seen how the institution of marriage is changing, narrowing its concentration to withstand threats from divorce and cohabitation, yet at the same time broadening its vision to include gay and lesbian couples. America’s families will continue to change to reflect changing social realities that include single parents, couples who choose to delay –or even forego—parenthood, blended families, and group homes. A recent *New York Times* article reported on an emerging trend in retirement communities in which single senior citizens pooled financial resources and lived together. The people interviewed for the story spoke of the importance of these non-sexual relationships for the sake of mutual companionship and care.

I saw a Ziggy cartoon that showed him driving along in the countryside, and coming upon a progressive series of signs similar to the old Burma Shave ads. The first sign reads “Old order ending,” the second, “New order beginning” and the final one, “Prepare to pay tolls.” That’s a pretty good description of why we’re anxious about all these changes. What are they costing us? When the world is moving faster than we can take in, it’s hard to see clearly and judge faithfully what is good and right and beneficial to the human family.

As people of faith, we turn to Scripture for guidance, yet are mindful of the difficulties of hearing God’s word amid the human ones, influenced as they are by culture and a pre-scientific worldview. One thing that is intriguing about today’s text is the picture of “family” found there. In contrast to the prevailing patriarchal model of that time and culture, this snapshot of the early church reveals a much different vision. Here we find a group of people acting counterculturally, based largely upon a common spiritual conviction. Listen for God’s word in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles in the fourth chapter at the 32nd verse [Read Acts 4:32-35].

We all agree that the American family is changing.....and yet, as the saying goes, the more things change, the more they stay the same. For the first sermon of this series I interviewed 12 couples whose collective marriages total 482 years. While they have had to deal with changing social realities, they were unanimous in their description of the family as a close-knit group of people who are committed to each other's well-being. The word "respect" showed up many times, as did humor and humility, communication and willingness to compromise. Typical of their perspective was this from a couple who have been married 33 years: *Marriage is a union and through good times and bad, its preservation supercedes "self." [Romantic] love waxes and wanes, but remember that all relationships must be constantly tended.*

I suggest that their definition offers a foundation not only for a successful marriage, but also for a successful family, in which the members "extend themselves for the purpose of nurturing one another's spiritual growth" [M. Scott Peck, from *The Road Less Traveled*]. And I further suggest that every human being needs a family to thrive and grow. The impulse toward relationship formation has been part of the human experience from the dawn of creation, when God looked upon the good earth God had made and declared, "it is not good for the human being to be alone." Part of the image of God implanted in our souls is the need for others, a deep sense of belonging, and the security that comes from being a member of a family that provides the essentials for a fulfilling, purposive life.

We get a picture of what that might look like in the morning text. Here is a community of diverse people, unified by common trust that Jesus Christ, once crucified, was alive. The experience of Christ's living presence had transformed them—their attitudes, perspective, and practice. Their unshakeable belief that Christ had been raised from death changed the way they did things and the way they treated other people, characterized by sharing their possessions so that everyone's needs were met. It is tempting to dismiss this picture as a lovely ideal, more symbolic than real. Biblical commentators are quick to explain that the early church's experience of community ownership was local to Jerusalem and fairly short-lived. But focusing only on its impracticality misses an important point: the reality of Christ's resurrection created a new role for his followers. Filled with "great grace" and power, the band of believers became a family. The shared resources testify to an egalitarian community in which everybody mattered. This is not an incidental point. While family loyalty and support for one's kin have been part of human society forever, the Church adopted a far broader understanding that included friends and strangers, insiders and outsiders, rich and poor. There were needy people, and there were

people who had lands and houses, and they were all worthy, all welcome, all valued. Writings contemporaneous to this time marvel at the way the Christians loved one another--and how they demonstrated that love through acceptance of each other, and through tangible acts of caring and support.

The living Spirit of Jesus Christ continues to inspire the Church to be family, one to another. In a family, your joys and concerns become mine as well, and vice versa. We bear one another's burdens. We cheer on each other's successes. We're stronger together than individually, because we can draw on the skills and gifts of a whole bunch of people. We hold each other accountable for carrying through on tasks and responsibilities. We forgive each other, and seek it ourselves when we make mistakes. The respect and regard we have for one another does not require a vote; it is not dependent upon what contributions you give; it's there no matter what.

Is Fairmount a family for you? How well do we reflect that high calling? Our mission statement doesn't use the word "family" explicitly, but describes us as "an inviting, caring, and challenging community of adults, youth and children, transcending all human distinctions." Does that description match your personal experience here?

I suspect that answer will vary from member to member. We come here with a variety of expectations and needs, from diverse backgrounds and shaping experiences. As much as we've grown in our ability to make visitors feel "at home" we do so inconsistently. I hear comments that testify both to our warmth and chilliness; our friendliness and identity as "the frozen chosen." Our fellowship groups are still organized too much around age categories, rather than a recognition of the value of connecting across the lines of age and generation. Non-traditional families sometimes doubt their welcome and full acceptance. And I think we don't really know each other all that well. We have an impression of the Fairmount Family--and because we clean up pretty well, and generally put our best face forward on Sunday morning---it may be the erroneous impression that we're a congregation of successful human beings who have it all together. The small group opportunities we have are designed to help us get to know each other better, and on a deeper level. Listing prayer concerns in the bulletin, and significant milestones in the Flyer newsletter demonstrate our desire to share joys and sorrows. The young people who were confirmed last weekend each had an adult mentor with whom they shared the confirmation journey. As a parent I know well how crucial it is for our children to have adults other than dad and mom who know and like them. Serving together on a committee, working together on an issue or project, singing together in one of our

choirs, or volunteering on one of the usher teams can provide a wonderful space to get to know your Fairmount Family. Your church family stands ready to provide a listening ear, a tender heart, a probing mind, a mission, a meal, a prayer, a friend ---because the fact is, you are part of this family. There are many within these walls and outside them who need to know they are welcome, they belong, to the end that no one feels orphaned; no one feels alone; no one is forgotten, and there is not a needy person among us. Try this: don't leave church this morning without introducing yourself to one person you don't know. We're all a little self-conscious doing that, wondering if the person we don't know is a 100-year member. Just pretend you're at a family reunion, where you don't know everyone, except for the fact that somehow you're all related. Because we are.

I don't know if a story I heard happened in our congregation...but it might have. One morning a Sunday School teacher began his lesson on Jesus by saying to the children, "Today I want to tell you about someone whom you all must meet. He is a person who loves you and cares for you, even when you make mistakes. He is very forgiving. He is kinder than the kindest person you know. He will always accept you and understand you." The teacher noticed one little girl getting more and more excited as he talked. Suddenly, unable to hold back any longer, she blurted out, "I know the person you're talking about! He's one of the ushers here!"

In a high tech, low touch world, the Church can embody the risen Christ with even handshake while looking directly into the other's eye, a warm greeting that says "welcome home."

Dorothy Day, social activist, one of the founders of the Catholic Worker Movement, lived her life among the poor and outcast in a section of New York City known as "Hell's Kitchen." She understood the universal need for family, and the inseparable connection between love for God and love for one another. Her words challenge us to become a family church—a church that considers itself a family for all.

*We cannot love God unless we love each other.
We know God in the breaking of bread, and we
know each other in the breaking of bread, and we
are not alone any more. Heaven is a banquet, and
life is a banquet too—even with a crust—where there
is companionship. We have all known loneliness, and
we have learned that the only solution is love, and
that love comes with community.*

May it be so more and more, sisters and brothers.

NOW TO THE ONE WHO BY THE POWER AT WORK WITHIN US IS ABLE TO ACCOMPLISH ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE THAN ALL WE CAN ASK OR IMAGINE, TO GOD BE GLORY IN THE CHURCH AND IN CHRIST JESUS TO ALL GENERATIONS, FOREVER AND EVER. AMEN.

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