

Sermon
Families: Form and Function
Rev. Mark Bigelow

Scripture Readings: Ephesians 3:14-21, John 25b-30

It's Mother's Day so I need to start with a story about my mom. Last year my parents were here for the 10th anniversary celebration of my ministry here. During the dinner they shared some embarrassing stories from my childhood. The worst part was that they took away a lot of good sermon material by telling the stories before I had. There was one story my mom didn't tell. When talking about my childhood my mom always says that I liked to swing. Now, this is from when I was very young. I don't remember this first hand—I have to take my mom's word for it. She's an honest person, so I think I can trust her. She says that I loved to swing. We had a swing set in the back yard and I would spend hours each day swinging away—probably many of your did as well. My mom says that as I swung I liked to sing. And the songs that I sang were popular love songs from the day. This being the early 1960's they were probably pretty sappy songs. Mom says when she asked me why I sang those songs I replied that it was because I was singing about my love for her.

I still love my mom. We actually have a lot in common, though on the surface you might first notice our differences. She lives in Colorado where she, and I, grew up. I live on Long Island. She has always been a homemaker; I had a different sort of relationship in my own marriage. She's always been married to my dad (and I suppose always will be), I've been divorced. In spite of the differences we share the most important parts of life—our values. I learned from my parents the values that I try to follow, even though I may apply them in a different way than they did. These values are basically to believe in God, follow the golden rule, be accepting of others, serve others, show respect, and be honest and trustworthy. Sort of like the Boy Scout code.

I am a very lucky man. I have not only had a wonderful relationship with my mother I continue to have a great love and affection for both my parents. So Mother's Day is for me a time of good and warm feelings. Mother's Day brings up a quite different set of emotions for many others. I'm sure in this room here today there are people who's dominant emotion is grief at the loss of their mother, or disappointment for not being a mother, or anger, or confusion, or just flat-out pain. As a holiday it reminds what is important in our lives and that can bring up a jumble of emotions.

That is one of the reasons that many Protestant churches refer to the day as the "Festival of the Christian Home." Rather than a celebration of mothers it becomes a recognition of the importance of a Christian home regardless of our marital or family status. This church is good place to do that. Look around you and see the variety of families represented here today. We are a church that is becoming much more diverse in it's family constellations. I don't know if it is merely a reflection of the world around us, or of our accepting nature, but we are quite a collection. Nuclear families, extended families, single parents,

divorced people, never-marrieds, blended families, people living together without being married, and my favorite, the label I claim for myself—binuclear families. I celebrate the myriad of family arrangements in our church. The variety of family experience is one of the elements that makes The Congregational Church the wonderful place that it is.

As a collection that represents the diversity of families in our communities we have an opportunity here to help forge the family values for the future. You know the church too often brings up the rear on social issues. The church is frequently the place that is the last to change. That's not right. The church should be a headlight rather than a taillight. We should be shining the way into the future. In this case we should be setting the agenda for the family values of the future. And what better place to do it than in an open and accepting place like this congregation. But it is going to take some work. It won't be easy. I hope you are ready to engage with me because I'm trying to get there. Where I'm going is a transformation of the church to become a place that cares as much about function as it does form.

The church has focused almost exclusively on family form. This is still seen in many evangelical churches where the only people who can lead the church are non-divorced, married men. Heterosexual marriage has been the sole norm of the church. At times this has gone so far as to leave divorced people outside the door with no way in. A sole focus on the nuclear family as the norm for life also negates the true family experience of single people in our society. Their family is often composed of friends whom they love as much as any family members. They often find their parenting needs filled by caring for the children of friends or of the church. This type of relationship deserves greater respect and recognition. And I can't even tell you the respect I have for moms and dads who are raising their children alone. The commitment and dedication required by them is awe-inspiring. How can a church say that single parents aren't welcome due to the form of their family? These are some of the hardest working and most loving people in midst. I salute them.

The challenge for us is to continue to value the form not just as form, but for the function it provides. Let me be concrete here. And let me use marriage as my model. We, the church, have emphasized marriage—appropriately so. We do so because the form of the marriage provides for functions that are important for our culture and our faith. Functions such as a place to keep commitments, a structure in which to raise children, a place to pass on our values and faith, a relationship to explore passion and intimacy, and many others. I cannot emphasize how important I believe this is.

In a world where we see the role models for motherhood in women from Laura Bush, to Hilary Clinton, to Rosie O'Donnell, we have to find ways to continue those functions even where there are non-traditional forms. We need to be exploring questions like how can we provide the loving support that single people desire? What does it mean to be a single adult with intimacy needs? How can we help people make life-long commitments?

Focusing on function rather than form allows the church to be more deeply engaged in the lives of the entire community. Focusing only on the nuclear family makes us

irrelevant for many of the people around us. This may also help us better support married people. The single-minded focus on marriage has in fact been detrimental to supporting relationships. If all the church can say is you need to be married no matter what, then the church has lost an opportunity to help people have good marriages. It is like our response to terrorists. After the bombing in Oklahoma City the initial thought of most Americans was it must have been someone from another country. This is understandable given our standing in the world today, but it was also a way to put the blame elsewhere. Once we found out the terrorist was one of us, from upstate New York even, we could no longer put all the blame out there. We had to look inside. We had to ask, what is it about our society that creates an individual like that? How can we improve our own communities so this doesn't happen again?

There is a similar dynamic with marriage. As long as we can say the problem with the world is divorce, or single parents, or, the ever-present putdown, broken homes, then we don't need to look at ourselves. But if instead we focus on function rather than form it frees us to develop the best marriages we can. The model of marriage may not be the longest one—though thank God for long marriages. The model for marriage may be the one with the most honesty and trust, or the one that weathers the deepest storms, or the one that shows the greatest service, or the one with the most amazing passion. The church, by focusing on function then may hold workshops and classes to support these values for us all; regardless of the form our relationship may take. Maybe then we can truly help people realize Paul's vision of love that heard read from Ephesians today. "May (God) grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." May we all know as Paul asked for, "to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge."

This won't be easy. It is not a libertarian, do whatever you want, sort of philosophy. It is upholding the dearest values of the Christian tradition in ways that have not been expressed before. It is speaking clearly about the importance of honesty, of commitment, of respect, of service, of our sexuality. It caring about family values for all families.

This is important not only for what it may do for our relationships, but what it may do for our children. For whatever the form of your family as parents, and as community members who care about all the children, we want the same things for our children. We want them to have solid self-esteem and personal confidence. We want them to love and care for others. We want them to be honest and respectful in all their relationships. We want them to stay off away from drugs, and alcohol, and smoking, and sex. This is hard in a media culture that can overwhelm them every hour of their day. We as a church want to be here to teach them the values that help them become the people God intended them to be. We want them to grow up to be spiritually healthy adults. Teaching, it must be said is not the best way to do this. Values, like faith are not taught, they are caught. Children learn best by modeling themselves after the adults they see around them. That is why all members of this church are surrogate parents to the children who go here. It is too great a job for any one, or two, parents to show their children what it means to be a full child of

God. Like Jesus when near death said to his mother, “Woman, here is your son.” And to his brothers and sisters in faith he said, “Here is your mother”. It takes us all—especially the older members of our community—to raise our children. We respect our elders as the role models for our children. And I thank all of you who have shown my children what it means to be people of faith, and people of integrity.

Earlier in the sermon I said I am a lucky man. Well, I am a very lucky man because I could begin my sermon talking about my mom and I can end my sermon talking about my dad. I know it’s Mother’s day, but the comparison with my dad is a more effective way to make my point. As with my mom my life has been quite different than my dad’s. We have surely never voted for the same party in any election (except for that one time when I was a foolish teenager), yet we are one in our love for our country. I not half the handyman he is and he isn’t a tenth the cook I am, yet there is no difference in the way we serve our families. He has been married to one woman and I’ve been divorced, yet he has nothing on me when it comes to commitment. I show my love differently than he, yet I have nothing on him when it comes to loving. We are unique in the ways we express our values, but in the values, the most important part of life, we are one.

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