

Kate Cudlipp: Our Families, Our Faith

Our Families, Our Faith

Sermon at Seekers Church, August 1995

by Kate Cudlipp

I've known for a few months that it was time for me to preach. Each time I have felt that urge – twice before – I ask myself, "Why?" Is it because I want to be the center of attention for awhile? I am reminded of the legislator who walked onto the floor of a state legislature and said, "If the Speaker will tell me the topic being debated, I would like to make a few remarks." Do I want to preach just to hear the sound of my voice – and make you listen to it?

I hope not. The focus for this liturgical season in Seekers has been God's story. We have been encouraged to look for the connections between our individual stories, our story as Seekers and the Word that God is offering to the world. God's word often breaks through to us through the words and stories of others. When I was having doubts about preaching, about answering the question "Who do you think you are to be preaching to others?", a friend reminded me that most, if not all, of the great themes in life have already been identified. None of us is likely to come up with something totally new. What is important is to share how each of us struggles with the great themes, to reveal to each other where God is working in our lives.

Once I knew it was time to preach, the subject of the sermon came to me. I wanted to examine the concept of "families". One can hardly open the newspaper or listen to television news

without being bombarded with questions about the status of families. And certainly each person's own story can hardly be told without reference to family. Deborah – in a sermon two weeks ago – talked movingly of her father and the influence of his life on hers; David preached in June In Praise of Fatherhood. Marjory in July told us of someone who was not a family member by blood but who was a spiritual mother to her.

What do we mean by "families"? Who are our families?

A FAMILY

- A Family is a PLACE to cry and laugh, and vent frustration, to ask for help; to be touched and hugged and smiled at.
- A Family is PEOPLE who love you no matter what, who share your triumphs, who don't expect you to be perfect, just growing with honesty in your own direction.
- A Family is a CIRCLE where we learn to like ourselves, where we learn to make good decisions, where we learn to think before we do, where we learn integrity and table manners, and respect for other people, where we share ideas, where we listen and are listened to, where we learn the rules to life, to prepare ourselves for the world.
- The world is a PLACE where anything can happen. If we grow up in a loving family, we are ready for the world.

Conventional wisdom says that there are easy answers to the question: a "real" family is a mother, father and child or children. There may be grandparents and aunts, uncles, and cousins, but the basic family is the nuclear unit. When a man and woman are married without children, they are known as a couple, not a family. When unmarried adults live together in couples or in community, regardless of the nature of their relationship, we do not generally think of them as "family".

The conventional way of thinking about families can lead to

all sorts of problems. In an article entitled "Beyond the Idolatry of Family to Participation in the Household of God", Janet Fishburn, a seminary professor and mother, points out the extent to which the nuclear family, a Victorian concept, has become an idol in Protestant churches and in America. She says:

[Conservative congregations] face a danger that their focus on the family has become an obsession, an obsession bordering on idolatry of a particular concept of the Christian family. Such idolatry, when it happens, is a tragically misdirected form of religious devotion which involves a preference for the familiar over the unknown, the local over the universal, and which treats the familiar and local as if they were absolute.

[In liberal congregations] the Victorian worldview is being used whenever the family unit is promoted as the primary source of Christian faith while the congregation is regarded as important primarily because it serves to ritualize "family-related" events... baptisms, youth confirmations, weddings and funerals.

Two-parent families with children under 18 years of age make up about 26% of the households in the United States. Some of the remaining 74% are traditional households from which grown children have moved, but the fact remains that a majority of households do not reflect the traditional nuclear family model.

Many people – in religious and secular settings – lament the move away from traditional families and believe if only we as a society could get back to the old forms, the nation would be okay. I believe that is a simplistic assumption, and I would like to list some ways that I believe an over-emphasis on the nuclear family as the most important unit in society has been dangerous:

1. Such an emphasis tends to isolate families by assuming that the family unit provides all that any of its members really need. This assumption greatly overrates the ability of two adults to provide the complete guidance and wisdom needed by children. The flip side of this is that a child's well-being depends too much on the emotional and physical health of the parents.
2. The isolation sets up a system that encourages parents to put too many hopes and expectations on their children. When children don't measure up or deviate from parents wishes, they may be cut off from family acceptance or approval – a kind of death penalty. And parents whose children don't turn out as expected feel like they've failed in their lives.
3. The nuclear family concept fosters a sense of competition – I will get my family's needs met, if necessary, at the expense of others.
4. The continued emphasis on the nuclear family limits creative ways for society to think about future generations. We keep trying to "fix" the nuclear family when we might better invest our energies in exploring alternative concepts such as that attributed to African culture: "It takes a whole village to raise a child."
5. Idealizing – and idolizing – the nuclear family relegates childless people to marginal positions in society and in churches.

What does the New Testament tell us about families? We have no parable such as the Good Samaritan to answer the question, "Who is my family?" But I would like to suggest that when Jesus directed us to love our neighbors as ourselves, he was saying something about families, as well. He didn't say, "Love your family members as yourselves." He didn't say, "Love other families as you love your own." He asked us to take a universal view and overcome the false barriers to accepting and loving all of God's creation. Distinguishing between my family members and the rest of the world can be a dangerous

distinction.

Jesus was a radical. When he asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" he was departing radically from the values of his time and culture, with its emphasis on biological family connections. He didn't promise that following him would be easy on family relations; in fact, he suggested that hearing and doing God's will could break up families.

Jesus' closest companions were the disciples, not his biological family. But Jesus did not let the needs of his "family" of disciples outweigh the needs of those others to whom he was sent. He did not establish a hierarchy of those to whom he was committed.

Jesus did not put families with children in an exalted place; among his most intimate friends were those in the nontraditional household of Martha, Mary and Lazarus, and he referred with approval to those who choose celibacy in order to do God's work.

I don't believe and don't mean to suggest that Jesus was anti-family, but I do believe he saw that misplaced family allegiances and ties could be obstacles to doing God's work.

Paul also had explicit things to say about family relationships, but I think some of his most helpful insights for families come in his reminders to the newly forming Christian churches of the value of diversity. His advice to the churches in Rome and Corinth is really advice to family members – members of one Body.

Today's epistle advises no member to think too highly of him- or herself and to value the variety of functions brought to the whole church family by each member. This is good advice for a nuclear family, a church, or any other body of human beings who seek to work together for each other's and the world's good.

It is a good antidote to the father who expects his son "to follow in his footsteps," to the mother who can't wait until her daughter has children, or the child who believes he is a failure because he is not as "bright" as his sister.

People of faith today are caught in terrible crosscurrents of demands. For those with children, the questions are how to get for them what they need without being callous to the needs of others. Are we to hearken to the images of the fierce mother bear who will kill anything that seems to threaten her young? Or the image David brought us from Sam Keen that a man "must be selfish enough to amass goods, often by defeating other men"? Do we try to make sure that our child gets one of the few openings in the best school available, necessarily oblivious to the needs of others competing for those spots? Is it our family against the world?

For those without children, how do we work to keep ourselves from being marginalized or turning into the selfish, me-first people society often assumes childless people to be?

We can look at our life as Seekers for clues to alternative ways to be family – and to the tensions that are inevitable for people of faith. In the paper that Lois Stovall recently completed on the history of inclusion in the Seekers community, she quotes from documents that were prepared in 1976 when the community was being formed. Sonya's and Mary Carol's roles are noted specifically. In one letter to the community, the question was asked, "Is the family unit to be seen as a key or the key factor in determining the shape of the Seekers Community?" Another document stated that part of Seekers' mission was the inclusion of children of all ages and that their education was to be shared among the whole community.

We are still dealing with that question and that mission. At the very least, with respect to the first question, our idea of family unit has expanded. Look at those who are part of the

community:

- We have "traditional" families with mother, father and children.
- We have families that are in the process of separation and divorce with all family members still part of the community.
- One of the youngest members of the community has two moms.
- Among us are single people who have chosen to have or adopt a child, or to be a foster parent to especially needy children.
- There are childless couples, straight and gay, and single people who are choosing to be part of a community that has declared children to be an important part of who it is.
- And there are people growing older – with spouses or alone – and with or without children close by or children at all.

With respect to each of these units, we see very clearly that none is self-sufficient and independent. We are more like an extended family than an aggregation of individual, unrelated groups. We look after each other's children; we help each other move; we comfort each other in times of loss; we encourage each other's new endeavors with financial and moral support; we celebrate new lives in more than a ritualistic fashion.

But we know the tensions between family and community demands, too. For many, the allocation of both time and financial resources between family and community is an ongoing tension. Muriel spoke about this tension last week. As one Seeker put it, "Our family could give more to the church if we cut down on some of our personal and household expenditures; where do we draw the line?" I believe that question is especially hard for families with growing children who are trying to figure out who they are in the midst of a culture that demands

conspicuous consumption in order to be accepted. I don't have the answer, but I believe it is the responsibility of the community to ask that its members continue to grapple with it.

There is also the tension between those with young children and those without. Sometimes there is the feeling that too much attention is focused on the young; what about the rest of us, some ask?

It is important to make sure that we, as a community or extended family, are not serving the needs of any individual or group to the detriment of others. I do believe, however, that as people of faith we acknowledge our connections with future generations. As our liturgy says, "You commanded our ancestors to teach their children so the next generation would know – even the children yet to be born – and they in turn would tell their children." This is a collective responsibility, not an insular activity for those with children of their own.

There are many ways for those without children to respond; not everyone has to teach or care for children. But those who are not called to direct contact with kids have, I believe, a responsibility to help see that people who are called in that way have time to respond to their call.

In Seekers this would mean taking on tasks that don't directly involve children so that others are freed up to be with the kids. In a workplace setting it could mean putting in a little extra time so that co-workers with kids can be better parents. It takes a whole village to raise a child – or a generation of children.

The final tension I want to mention between family and community is the tension between cultivating our own extended family – Seekers – and being responsive to needs outside the community. We, like any biological family, can easily slip into the mindset, "If there is anything left over after we've

taken care of ourselves, we'll share it."

In summary, I see two issues that we won't resolve once for all, but we must continue to engage if we are to be faithful people:

It is not so simple to say who our families are; families may not stay fixed over time.

And when we know who our families are, there is the ongoing tension to determine how we divide our energies and resources between our families and the world.

Perhaps the image of family from the FLOC Foster Home Mother's Day Luncheon is the one I would like to end with. It suggests that families are both ends and means: they are ends in that they are the places that we can have our most profound human experiences of acceptance and love – experiences which are expressions of God's love and acceptance. They are means in that they equip us to take God's good news into a hostile and disbelieving world.

A FAMILY

- A Family is a PLACE to cry and laugh, and vent frustration, to ask for help; to be touched and hugged and smiled at.
- A Family is PEOPLE who love you no matter what, who share your triumphs, who don't expect you to be perfect, just growing with honesty in your own direction.
- A Family is a CIRCLE where we learn to like ourselves, where we learn to make good decisions, where we learn to think before we do, where we learn integrity and table manners, and respect for other people, where we share ideas, where we listen and are listened to, where we learn the rules to life, to prepare ourselves for the world.
- The world is a PLACE where anything can happen. If we

grow up in a loving family, we are ready for the world.