

**“Don’t Give Up on the Family”**  
**Texts: Psalm 78:1-8; Romans 12:9-18**  
**The Reverend Joanna M. Adams**  
**Morningside Presbyterian Church**  
**October 18, 2009**

*If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Romans 12:18*

When it comes to the family and its state of health in America, 2009, there's a choice to make. You can either take the position that the family is nigh unto death, in the ICU on a respirator with the undertaker standing by. Or, you can take the position that though the family shows obvious forms of distress, the family is here to stay. I choose the latter.

Let me ask you this question. Is there anyone present this morning, who did not grow up in a family of some kind or another? Even if you lost your biological parent or parents, no matter what your early life circumstances, there was someone, or more than one someone in your life who represented stability, someone who taught you how to use a napkin and to take off your hat in the house, someone who at least every once in a while cared whether or not you lived or died.

Three things seem obvious to me. First, family patterns are changing. The number of traditional, four-person families consisting of mother, father, and two children is much lower than that number was a quarter of a century ago. Families with single parents as heads of households have dramatically increased in number, as have the number of blended families. This has all happened concurrently with one of America's greatest and continuing social problems - the feminization of poverty. The second obvious fact is that the family, which is the oldest social institution, found in every culture and every historical era going back to the very beginning, is indeed showing signs of wear and tear these days. The third point, a more optimistic one, is that the family is here to stay, because we all need families. Coming generations will need families in which to grow up. Even more fundamentally, families are a God-given institution.

In the Biblical story of creation, after the first human creature had been formed, the Creator God said, “Hmm, it is not good for that creature to be alone,” So God kept creating - animals of the fields, birds of the air - and gave the human creature the right to give names to all of them. But still, there was no helper or partner among the animals or the birds. So, as the story goes in the second chapter of Genesis, God caused a deep sleep to fall over the creature and took one of his ribs and closed that place back up with flesh, and out of the rib made a woman, and brought her to the man, and thus, the first family was begun. Genesis 2:24 reads, “Therefore, a man leaves his father and his mother and

clings to his wife, and they become one flesh.” One flesh here refers both to the physical union in marriage and the establishment of a new kind of kinship. (1)

In the other creation account, in the first chapter of Genesis, both human creatures are created at the same time. Whichever story you choose, whichever account, the message is the same: God created human beings for life together. By nature, humans need company. Humans need companionship. We need other people with whom to share the vicissitudes of life, sickness and health, richer and poorer, the better times and the worse times. Not everyone needs to be married. Everyone does not want to be married, but all of us need other people. We need them in our lives in close and intimate ways. The quality of our lives depends to the greatest degree on the quality of our relationships. Clearly, Americans believe in marriage and family. Ninety percent of us marry and divorce, at the highest rate of any place on earth. (2) I can't resist sharing with you the story of the mother who ordered a wedding cake for her daughter and instructed the baker to decorate the cake with these words from I John 4:18: “Perfect love casts out fear.” Unfortunately, the baker looked in regular John 4:18. On the big day the wedding cake was delivered, and it was decorated with these words: “You have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.”

You did not come to church today either to hear jokes or a sociological analysis of what is going on with the family in America today. What I want to do is to look briefly at the current state of affairs through the lens of our faith tradition, to assess where we are in light of that tradition, and offer some thoughts on negotiating today's choppy waters.

It really is not helpful to take a literal approach to Scripture with regard to the family, since, for example, polygamy was the norm for marriage in the Hebrew cultures of the Old Testament. What mattered about family before anything else was property inheritance. That was of paramount importance, and as a subset of that, wives were considered to be the property of their husbands.

In the New Testament, we learn that Paul did not want to get married, and thought that other people should get married only if they couldn't help themselves. All this was because Paul expected the second coming of Christ during his lifetime. You just didn't need to deal with all the *trousseaux* and all of that, I guess, if it was all going to be over pretty soon.

Jesus himself never married; nevertheless, we can learn some important things about family life when we look at Jesus' life. Jesus was saved from certain death in infancy by his earthly family, specifically, his devoted father Joseph, when Herod was out to get all the boy babies. Jesus was raised in a loving home where he learned how to be a good human being and where he was often told the stories of his faith tradition. The wonderful story of Jesus' disappearance during the Passover festival on the family trip to Jerusalem makes it obvious that

parents' anxieties over their adolescent children are universal, and also that Jesus' mom and dad must have done a good job in nourishing him in the love of God and the teachings of the Torah - that when he disappeared, he ended up at the synagogue.

Here's what I worry about. I worry that many good-intentioned parents have crammed their lives so full of so many things - so many activities - that they do not take time to read the Bible stories, or to spend time just being with their children. I worry that fatherhood is not valued as much as it ought to be. I worry that women who choose homemaking as the focus of their lives are sometimes made to feel unworthy. I worry too that mothers who work sometimes get the message that they are inadequate mothers. I worry that there are so few family rituals that give structure and meaning to life. These are the kinds of things that we need to pay attention to if we want our children to grow up to be decent, loving, whole human beings able to create relationships themselves.

Throughout its pages, the Bible honors the family in its evolving forms. Throughout the Bible are found spiritual values that are to be lived out through ethical behavior. Paul, in writing to the Romans, presents a basic list of Christian, ethical guidelines for Christians and their families, for all their relationships. He writes of the genuineness of love, of steadfastness, of mutuality: *Outdo one another in showing honor to one another. Live in harmony. Don't be ugly if somebody's been ugly to you - now, that's a hard one - and if it's possible live in peace with everyone you can.* If you follow just those admonitions in Romans, I promise that your family life will benefit immensely.

This morning's Psalm, so perfect for a baptism Sunday, reminds us of our mandate to tell "the coming generations of the glorious deeds of God so they will set their hopes in God and not forget the works of God." I want to speak a moment, in honor of Gabe - about children. "Families are the backbone of society for one primary reason - because of the critical role they play in the spiritual, physical, emotional and social development of children." (3) We all believe that. But if so, why are so many families falling apart? The tabloids can't seem to get enough of Kate and Jon Gosselin. I'm ashamed to tell you I do keep up with that family, eight children, six of whom are in a set of sextuplets. The parents are separated. Jon had an affair with a 23-year-old schoolteacher. Jon says he still loves the kids, but he has left them. In an excellent article in *Time* magazine on the flame-out of modern families, Caitlin Flanagan laments the fact that infidelity is eroding so sharply the institution of marriage, and she certainly has a large crop of high profile scandals to choose from: Eliot Spitzer, Mark Sanford, David Letterman, John Edwards, John Ensign, and so on. (4)

So, should we hold a wake for the family? Or is marriage an institution that we cannot do without? Do we not hear, today, a mandate to protect the family and to remember the children? Adults who drift in and out of relationships and in and out of their children's lives are not helping their children very much. Then there is this

sobering thought: “The generation of children growing up today will be taking care of us when we are old.” (5)

I listened to a panel discussion not long ago: Catholics, Jews, Hindus, talking about worship in different faith traditions. When the question of home faith rituals came up, the Protestant and Catholic murmured something about saying the blessing and lighting an Advent wreath. There wasn't much to say. It was the rabbi who really captured my attention. He said, “Everything we do at the synagogue is intended to enrich Jewish family life. The family, the home is our spiritual center.”

Oh my goodness, what a role the church needs to play in supporting parents in being parents and helping them raise their children, learning and living out the ethic of love. We've got to be the biggest advocate we can be - teaching love and living love, helping our children learn how to share with their neighbors. We need to support couples in every way. I'm grateful that a couple's group has started at Morningside Church. I hope that the demands this church puts on all of you will never be a factor in eroding your family life. It ought to be exactly the opposite. I remember a young dad who came to me, who had agreed to chair an important committee at the first church that I served. He came to me one afternoon, just terribly guilty. “Joanna, I can't do this committee and be there for my boys.”

And I said, “John, forget about chairing the committee.” By the next day, I had gotten someone else to do it. If you're a parent of a kid, put your child first. Children need four things from the people who raise them: Our presence, our time, our affectionate attention, and our best take on rules to live by, which is best conveyed by our living ethically than by telling our children to.

Our children should never have to experience or witness two things: Domestic violence or substance abuse. I was horrified to learn in my research for this sermon that one in four children grows up in a home where there is substance abuse of one kind or another.

When the Georgia Legislature convenes after the first of the year, I will no longer be your pastor, but I hope you will pay attention to what's going on in terms of public policy affecting families and children. In the state of Georgia, one out of five children lives in poverty - the poverty line being \$14,051 for a family of two. Over a quarter of a million children in Georgia are uninsured. Our state ranks 40th in the well-being of our children. One is a good number; 40 is a bad number. Our infant mortality rate is among the highest in the nation. Before children can be taught manners or morals or anything else, they need to be alive. They need to be treated when they are sick and fed when they are hungry. Let's not give up on the children before they've even had a chance to get going.

And let's not give up on marriage either. I'll say it again - marriage is not for everybody. Caring for and being connected with others is for every body. One of

the most important people in my life was my aunt who lived with us when we were growing up. She was not married, but I was blessed by having a second mother, and it made all the difference in the world to me.

When I speak of marriage I am speaking of it in the traditional sense – bride, groom, wedding gowns, bags of rice. I am speaking about two people being joined together in a sacred bond, making exclusive commitments to one another and thereby creating together a new family. Yes, half of those weddings end in divorce, but most everybody keeps on trying to get it right, and almost everybody wants to get it right. Happily, many do. A long, good marriage is a very special thing.

I'm convinced that every adult who wants to have a shot at making a long-term marriage commitment ought to have the chance to do it. I'm including in that word "every" people who are of the same gender and people who are of opposite gender. I simply can't get my mind around why it is that in a time when so many are exhibiting infidelity and a lack of commitment at such alarming rates, we would want to forbid gay people from making commitments to one another.

Conservative columnist David Brooks puts it very well. "We should not only allow gay marriage, we should insist on gay marriage. We should regard it as scandalous that two people could claim to love one another and not want to sanctify that love with marriage and fidelity." (6)

No doubt, many of you here today see things differently from the way Mr. Brooks and I do. I respect that. I'm not speaking now for Morningside Presbyterian Church or for the Presbyterian Church USA, but only for myself. In my own spiritual journey, it took me a while to arrive at the conclusion that the God I meet on the pages of Scripture would not want to privilege one category of human being over another. The God I meet in Scripture thought it was not good for us humans to be alone. Above all, the God I know in the Bible gives us the capacity to love one another. I have never thought that the problem with our world today is that we have just too darn much love. Isn't too little love what we're suffering from?

I believe "we love because God first loved us." I believe that a healthy family is people sharing life together, sticking it out through thick and thin, using patience, forgiveness, all those other tools when they are necessary, and holding fast to that which is good, year after year.

A summer or so ago, I did a funeral for an elderly woman who had lived a vibrant, full life. She was in her 80s. For 61 years, she and her partner had been together in one of the most loving relationships I have ever seen. The laughter, the tenderness, the respect were obvious to all. In fact, when my friend died, my other friend - her partner - went to live near her deceased partner's family, because she had no blood kin left on her own side. I am ending my sermon today

the way I have in honor of my deceased friend and her partner and in honor of all who wait for the day when wedding bells can ring for them and for all whom God joins together in faithful, lasting love.

(1) *The New Interpreter's Study Bible*.

(2) *The Atlantic*, July/August 2009, p.120.

(3) Unable to locate source.

(4) Caitlin Flanagan, "Why Marriage Matters," *Time*, July 13, 2009.

(5) Ibid.

(6) *New York Times*, "The Power of Marriage".