

The background of the slide is a blue-tinted architectural drawing of a building's floor plan and elevation. The drawing includes various dimensions, door and window symbols, and structural lines. Overlaid on this background is the title text in a large, yellow, hand-drawn font.

A FAITH THAT VALUES ALL FAMILIES

Rev. Michael Anthony Howard
Brookside Community Church
Pentecost 17B - Sept 16, 2018
1 Corinthians 13:1-13

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If by 'family values' we mean valuing one kind of family over others, then we have misunderstood the radically welcoming teachings of Jesus. As followers of Jesus, we are called to build faith communities where our differences are embraced, where all families are valued.

Love is the mark of faithfulness

In Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, he praised the importance of love. Love, he said, is more important than our prayers, our rituals, our knowledge, our charity, or our beliefs. Most of us have heard the poetic language of this "love chapter" at weddings. What is often missed, though, is a reference to the story behind the text. This chapter is part of a wider letter to a congregation in crisis. This early Christian community in Corinth was divided, with various factions proclaiming a sense of spiritual superiority over the others. It was written to a people that had forgotten why they exist. They had forgotten that the primary mark of faithfulness to Jesus' teachings would be their love for each other. Love, Paul said, is greater than any other faith characteristic. Christian communities exist in order to learn how to love. And the picture Paul presents to us is a wildly inclusive, radically welcoming, indiscriminate, broadly accepting, all-embracing, wholly unlimited love.

While this passage is rarely heard outside of weddings, the love it refers to is more than just a characteristic of a faithful marriage. Love is the defining mark of a faithful community. For followers of Jesus, learning to love is why our faith communities exist. Jesus, remember, was the one who blessed the poor, healed the leper, ate with thieves, protected the accused, and welcomed the outcast and excluded. Jesus loved so much he was crucified for it! Even so, it has always been hard for those who claim to follow Jesus to fully embrace his teachings—or at least to live them out. It is not easy to be a community built on the radically welcoming love of God. Just like that early church in Corinth, it is easier for us to claim ourselves religiously superior for our prayers, our religious practices, our knowledge, our philanthropy, or even our doctrine—then for us to create safe spaces of love where all of us can flourish together, spaces that radically welcome everyone. Religious folks want to be religious, but nobody wants to learn to love. At least, that is the only way I can think of to make sense of the religious phenomenon that has existed at least since the 1980s that shames and rejects certain kinds of families, and justifies it by claiming the need to protect "family values."

A few years ago, I watched a video of a discussion among several pastors about the meaning of the word "home." They were beginning a new public relations campaign titled "Welcome Home." So they had gathered to explore together what home meant for them.

It seemed to be self-evident that home was a very positive word. It brings up notions of comfort, intimacy, and safety. One pastor focused on the language that is often used to talk about the church. Some of the most important words, she said, were family, body, and house. Family, she said, was about unconditional love and acceptance. The language of the body was about us learning to function together so that we can act on God's behalf. The image of a house was about "creating something so tangible in society that people are drawn to it." When we talk about the church as a home, she said, we are actually talking about changing the world.¹

¹ Bobbie Houston, "Hillsong Vision Film 2012," (6:19), by Hillsong Church. Uploaded to Vimeo on March 2, 2012. <https://vimeo.com/37783286> (Accessed on September 1, 2018).

Another pastor then said that a home was a place where we feel safe enough together, where we can “take off our masks.”

I remember how moved I was as I listened. “Yes!” I thought, “I want to be a part of that kind of community! I want that kind of family! I want to be in a church where I feel known, where I’m fully accepted as I am...without having to pretend to be someone else. I want an environment where I’m accepted—masks off.”

Then, a young pastor from New York City spoke up: “We [are taking] for granted that people know what a home even is,” he said. People move to this city, he explained, because home was not a welcoming place for them. “There’s nothing there for me,” they would say, “that’s why I came here.” So he said that in his work, he begins with the basics—redefining what a home *should* be.²

I think this is the work every church community needs to do. We take for granted that everyone knows what church is, what home is, what marriage is, what family is. So this is the work we are doing together this month. Just like the Apostle Paul was reminding the church in Corinth why they existed, we are going to be rethinking the meaning of the word *family*. What is a family? Why do they exist?

Family is a Dangerous Word

This is important work to do in our day and age. Whether we recognize it or not, family is a dangerous word. Ask anyone who works for organizations that promote human rights, women’s rights, or LGBTQ rights and they will tell you, one of the most potent opinions they have to work against is the belief in a cultural threat to “traditional family values.” Sometimes, it is coded as traditional “Judeo-Christian Values.” For many, this need to protect “family values” has often meant being excluded from the family, sometimes violently. Since the early 1980s, a religious movement actively began organizing around the notion of protecting so called “family values.” From this perspective, feminists, LGBTQ persons, and progressives of all kinds not only lacked these family values, but their existence was seen as “a threat to family values.”

According to this kind of thinking, family is about “one man and one woman living together in a church-sanctified marriage.” This is where *complementarianism* comes in. Still very popular in many church communities, this view is that men and women serve roles that are complementary to each other. The man provides for the wife and children; the woman does all of the work to care for the family—cooking, cleaning, child-care. For them, this is what it looks like to grow up in a “Christian household.” Those who challenge the traditional understanding of gender identity or human sexuality, pastors like me, are seen as enemies of the family. Openly aiming to combat movements for women’s rights, for the rights of LGBTQ persons, or even progressive churches like ours, they have created organizations like Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, and American Family Radio. In essence, they have stolen the word family and made it violent.

Some women suffer spiritual abuse by being told to remain in abusive relationships in order to protect the sanctity of their marriage. Homosexual family members hide in fear that their sexuality

² Carl Lentz, Ibid. (8:21).

will be discovered by their family and they might be forced to attend a “conversion therapy.” Though it is illegal in New Jersey, conversion therapy still happens today—and debates about the harm it causes are all over the news.

Elements of this cultural framework still seep into our everyday language, even within progressive circles. Unmarried individuals—especially women—are treated as if they cannot be fully human without a spouse, or without children. Divorced marriages—especially single mothers—are spoken of in the language of brokenness: broken marriages, broken families, broken homes. And so we create a culture where anything other than the 1950s fiction of a nuclear family—one man, one woman, and two-point-five children—is less than ideal, unchristian even. I may be wrong, but I would guess that if we were to actually collect the data about our own congregation, we would find that many of us come from families that look somewhat different than this “ideal” family.

In this cultural framework, family is a dangerous word. It works within an ideology of control—an ideology that justifies violence, especially against gender and sexual minorities. This violence is reinforced, then, by the theological emphasis on what is perceived as “Christian marriage.”

Valuing Families of Choice

I believe that NYC pastor was working in the right direction when he said that the word “home” needed to be redefined for people in his congregation. For us at Brookside, I believe family is a term we are being called to reclaim and redefine. What is a family? Why do families exist? I believe that if we are honest with ourselves we will find that the ideal family, if there is such thing, will have nothing to do with its size or shape, and more to do with whether it exhibits the kind of love the Apostle Paul was referring to in his first letter to the Corinthians. From that perspective, we should be suspicious of words like family and specifically “family values.” That is because, rather than referring to safe spaces where the radically inclusive love of God can be found, phrases like family and family values have been used by those with an ideology that is dangerous to women, transgender persons, sexual minorities, and a host of unnamed others we likely don’t even realize. So instead of protecting so-called family values, I want to suggest that our calling as a congregation is to **value families**—families of all colors, ages, abilities, shapes, and sizes.

As Anne Bathurst Gilson put it, when we intentionally value families, we turn the notion of “family values” inside out. It “becomes an inclusive concept, embracing the various differences among us instead of controlling and excluding them.” This allows us to see the term family in a new light, extending beyond the nuclear family. It can include “our partners, our close friends, our children, our biological families, companion animals...whomever we have *chosen* as family.”³ As I joked with Lois and Amy a few weeks ago, imagine what our car decals might look? Gilson explains that, especially for LGBTQ folx, many people have had to separate themselves from their biological families for their safety and well-being. “Many,” she says, “even most of us, need to learn how to *be* and create *ways of being* in relation to our various nonbiological configurations of family. In this sense, choice serves to expand the notion of family rather than contract it.”⁴ When she talks about

³ Anne Bathurst Gilson, “Family Values versus Valuing Families of Choice,” in *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (Spring, 1996), p. 102.

⁴ Ibid, p. 103.

choice, she is not suggesting that we all have the freedom just to choose the circumstances in our lives. That would be naïve. Instead, she is emphasizing the importance of “the conscious movement [toward] intimate, nurturing relationships that enhance survival.”⁵ She’s talking about the need that all of us have to be in safe spaces with others where we can begin to experience the kind of radically inclusive love Jesus taught us about, the kind of love the Apostle Paul wrote about.

I believe the gospel is calling us today to move in the direction of *valuing* families, regardless of what they look like—even if they are families that have been chosen for the sake of safety and well-being. This is what will make us at Brookside a more inclusive community. As we learn to love better, I believe we will begin to see differences—even differences in what our families can look like—in ways that are more faithful to the gospel. We will see that differences like race, sexual orientation, gender, age, or physical or mental abilities—are actually God-given opportunities for us to grow, for us to learn to love better. This is how we will grow spiritually, mentally, and morally. By learning to *value* families, we will see our differences as a reminder of why we exist rather than treating our differences as threats to our existence.

That, I believe, is what the Apostle Paul was talking about in his letter to the divided church in Corinth. Love is patient. Love is kind. It’s not proud or boastful. It doesn’t dishonor others. It’s not self-seeking, but rejoices in justice and truth. “Love,” Paul said, “always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.” Love is found in spaces where intimate, nurturing relationships flourish.

We live in a world where a large number of people have been excluded, dishonored, unprotected, forced to persevere without hope. They have been left to suffer lonely and in pain, lacking any sense of belonging. All they have ever known of religion is self-seeking exclusion and violence. They have not known the feeling of love and belonging; they’ve not been told they are God’s beloved; they’ve not experienced the radical welcome of God. I believe that can change. I believe we can change that! I believe ***we must*** work to change that! When I pray for us at Brookside, I pray the prayer the Apostle Paul prayed for the church in Corinth—that with all of our resources, our knowledge, our skills and our spiritual gifts, that we will become a community where those excluded people can find a place to call home—a place where families of all kinds, families like theirs, are welcome.

So let us love! Let’s let the radically welcoming love of God be the defining mark of our community. Let us make learning to love the reason why Brookside Church exists. Let us follow Jesus, the one who loved so much he was crucified for it! It may not be easy, but I pray that we become a community built on love: wildly inclusive, radically welcoming, indiscriminate, broadly accepting, all-embracing, wholly unlimited love. Let’s build a community together where the word family means that kind of love, where all of our differences are embraced, and where all of our families are valued.
—Amen.

⁵ Ibid. Emphasis added.