



# Where Do Families Come From?

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Brookside Community Church  
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Genesis 2:4-25



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As individuals, we may value the freedom from attachment and for self-determination. But as human beings, we are born into relationships of mutual care because we need each other to survive. Human families exist because we need each other, because "it is not good for human beings to be alone."

## The family is changing

We all know the shape of the family is changing. As Grace Zhou explains, the *Modern Family* “is comprised of different cultures, levels of intelligence, sexual orientations, and maturities, with no single person acting as the main character.”<sup>1</sup> Without me pointing it out, you would likely not realize that Zhou’s commentary is about a specific family; she is describing the ABC sitcom *Modern Family*, which is part of the genre known as a “mockumentary” or “docucomedy.” We get to watch this cast of diverse kinds of families interact with each other, do terribly silly things, and then reflect on it with the audience. As a “mockumentary,” it not only makes a parody of the documentary style, but it is also a parody of the topic it is addressing, the modern family.

The family dynamic is not only changing in terms of its shape and membership. Our ways of parenting are changing, and even our understanding of what it means to be a parent. According to the *Onion*, here are a few of the latest parenting fads:

- “Couples are [now] waiting to announce their pregnancy...until after their child has graduated college and become a partner in a successful law firm.
- “Parents are [now] choosing **not** to learn the gender..of their obstetrician.
- “As part of the new Infinity Womb trend, women are [now] using a wide range of Lamaze, strength-training, and yoga techniques...to forcefully prevent their children from ever leaving their wombs, forever protecting them from the harsh realities of the world.”<sup>2</sup>

When it comes to thinking seriously about family, there are a number of places that we can look. Comedy might not be a bad place to start. Our sacred scriptures are another. But where do we go to get a firmer handle on the subject of what families are and how they are changing in our world today? Judges, lawyers, politicians, psychologist, and religious leaders like myself know that as families change, our roles in society will play a role in that evolution. So many of us often go to anthropologists. One anthropologist who has devoted a significant amount of attention on the family is Maurice Godelier.

In his book *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, Godelier outlines three forces that have modified the forms and practices of the family in Western societies: 1) An emphasis on the right to choose our partners; 2) changes in gender relations; and 3) the progressive valorization of the child. (I would love to spend some time exploring with you each of these and how they have affected the way we understand family, especially that last one. But we will have to leave that for another day.) All of these forces, Godelier goes on to say, are borne along by a deeper current, a current that “promotes the individual...independent of [their] family or social group,” that values autonomous behavior, and that values “deserved and negotiated authority over the kind that is inherited or imposed.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, families are changing because we increasingly value individual autonomy and we are suspicious of authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Grace Zhou, “What makes MODERN FAMILY Funny?” *Comicverse*, December 31, 2016, <https://comicsverse.com/what-makes-modern-family-funny/> (Accessed on September 22, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> The Reader’s Digest, “Parenting Fads According to the Onion.” <https://www.rd.com/joke/parenting-fads-according-to-the-onion/> (Accessed September 22, 2018).

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Godelier, *The Metamorphoses of Kinship*, trans. Nora Scott (Brooklyn: Verso, 2011), p. 6.

As part of a denomination that was formed in the late 1950s and a faith tradition that prides itself on thinking critically, this deeper current Godelier describes may sound like a description of our own faith context. As a denomination, most of us are proud of the United Church of Christ for being rooted in our freedom of personal conscience, our emphasis on autonomy, and our congregational polity, which encourages us to be suspicious of unearned authority. And so, I think there are some important things that our faith tradition can offer to society as our families continue to evolve, and our understanding of family continues to change.

For some, this change in the family means a threat to what they think are the most important social values: respect, loyalty, safety, solidarity, mutual care. To others, “we are the first in the history of the world to allow individuals to live as they desire and feel.”<sup>4</sup> It seems that the world, then, is divided between the two poles of demonizing this shift or uncritically praising it. But I think there is room for another attitude. That is, before rushing too quickly to judgement, we should focus on what is most important, the actual situations and practices of everyday people. Is it possible, on the one hand, to promote the individual, to value autonomy, to be critical of inherited or imposed authority, and on the other hand, to value the safety, loyalty, respect, solidarity, and mutual care that families teach us? I believe it is.

Rethinking our understanding of family is a good thing, because now we are freed to value the fact that people and the relationships between them come in many different shapes and sizes. As I emphasized last week, following the radically welcoming love of God that Jesus taught, I believe God is calling us to be a community that values all families. It is also a good thing because it allows us to see with more clarity how families have not only changed throughout history, but that family structures look different in different cultures. Rethinking our understanding of family is a good thing because it allows us to be honest about what is good and healthy and life-giving about family relations—while also valuing the freedom of individual personal conscience, freedom to create autonomous communities, and the freedom to be suspicious of unearned authority.

Even so, we must also be careful of the dangers that come with individualism. Our world is increasingly hostile and competitive. With individualism comes anxiety, alienation, depression, and loneliness.

## The Origin of Family

In our reading this morning, we hear the ancient story of God’s creation of humanity. Admittedly, this passage comes with difficulties. It has been used to demonize science, particularly the theory of evolution. It has also been used to justify the notion that women were created to be “helpmates” for men. (Of course, those who read it in this literal and illiterate way fail to realize that it implies that without women, men would be helpless.) Yet, underneath this I see a deeper message. I believe this story rings true for us because we all know the fear of being left to ourselves. We can all imagine being alone in the world. We all know what is like to be left to do something important by ourselves. And if we look deeper at the world around us, we will discover that in every part of our lives we benefit from the work others have done. God looked down, the story tells us, and said, “It is not good for human beings to be alone.”

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 8.

This is a fundamental truth that is evident at the moment of birth. Most other mammals are born with the ability to walk, run, and eat within days or weeks after birth. Human beings take years to develop into maturity. We are born vulnerable animals; We need our mother's to feed us and our families to protect us. Even more than that, we have to learn to survive. We do not know by instinct what is good for food. Without others teaching us, we would not know how to survive the hot summers or the cold winters. While other animals rely on instincts to survive, the human brain traded instinct for mimicry, we have evolved to learn to survive in community with each other.

## Autonomy and Covenant Community

As individuals, we may value the freedom from coerced attachment and for self-determination. But as human beings, we are born into relationships of mutual care because we need each other to survive. Human families exist because we need each other, because "it is not good for human beings to be alone." In our tradition, we have developed the language of talking about autonomy in the context of covenant: covenant autonomy. It is possible to respect individual conscience, to value autonomy, the freedom for self-direction, and to see ourselves as living within the context of a covenant community. Autonomy without covenant leaves us alone and vulnerable. Autonomy in covenant provides us a context for love, respect, safety, and mutual care.

When we think about giving in the context of autonomy outside the context of covenant connection, people give in order to get. We may end up with charity, but the giver is seen as someone who is morally superior. The giver is valued over the receiver. But in the context of covenant relationships, individuals see themselves as equally valued with others, and giving and receiving are part of networks of mutual exchange, of voluntary cooperation. People offer services to each other for the sake of mutual benefit. We give to the other out of our love for them. I believe that as our understanding of family changes, covenant communities like ours provide the context and opportunity to teach and remind ourselves of that voluntarily caring for each other is a godly thing. God gives to us out of love, and so we love each other. The more we care for each other, the more we live into the beauty of what it means to be human.

Autonomy without connection creates an atmosphere of competition, we hang on a rope that swings between the poles of shame and pride. But autonomy in covenant allows for us to build self-confidence as we grow together. As our families change, and our understanding of families change, covenant faith communities like ours can become places where we are reminded that families should be spaces of mutual belovedness, where we see each other as beloved.

So where do families come from? They come from a fact of human nature—that we are vulnerable creatures, and that we literally cannot survive without each other. We need each other to survive. Theologically, God created us in such a way that we are our best when we live together in relationships of mutual care. As we grow in our individualism, autonomy, and suspicion of authority, and this causes ever more changes in our understanding of families, communities like ours will be places where the modern human can rediscover the beauty of covenant relationships.

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