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# Marion weekly update

## FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

*SERMON "Family Matters" Romans 16:1-2, 7, Judges 4:4-9, Ruth 1:16-18*

When I hear preaching on the matter of family today I think there is a lot that misses the mark. Much of it is prescriptions about the nuts and bolts of who is in the family and pigeon holing people into specific roles of who does what.

The nuclear family, husband, wife, and a few kids is lifted up often as the standard and is said to be the Biblical way family is intended. The problem at the outset is that the term nuclear family has only been around since the 1920s so through history believers couldn't equate that term with anything Biblical.

Keep in mind as well that all Biblical mean is inspiration was found for something in the Bible. And family is by no means limited in scripture. In the Old Testament it was a man with multiple wives. Women and children were quite literally property. A wife was essentially purchased from her father. Women could pass their servants to the husband to have kids and those kids would be credited to the wife. This was important as part of status as a wife was how well you could bear children for your husband.

This was the family. The Law of Moses in many ways underwrote this structure, which makes it Biblical and even God endorsed. Some will disagree with this statement, but all you have to do is actually read the Bible and there it is.

In the New Testament though the family seems to change. Women and children still had property status but the arrangement was monogamy, no more multiple spouses. We see a lot less about family itself than in the Old Testament. This makes sense because in the OT bloodline was incredibly significant, particularly in times of kings and waiting for the Messiah. Once the Messiah arrives attention shifts to Him. And outside of Jesus' family in the gospels most of what we see are representatives of families like Jairus, Lydia, and other folks who are mentioned. Even Jesus' family we don't see Joseph much at all beyond the birth story. Mary? Sure. And the incident where His brothers and sisters fetch Him to bring Him home because they think Jesus has gone crazy.

The thing is, in all of these Biblical families something holds true. Particularly in the OT most all of the families are a mess. They are holding to the model of family they knew and trusted was Godly but over and over again they were wildly dysfunctional. You would be hard pressed to find an example of a family in the Old Testament that wasn't loaded with serious problems.

Two important notes at this point. First is that families are made of people. People have issues which means families do too. Second the reason families look different through the Bible is because culture has always defined what family structure looks like. In ancient Mediterranean culture where the Old Testament took place that was what family was. Times change. By the New Testament and the Greek and Roman influence hit the world their model looked different and it went to monogamy.

We'll also see it proven out that even what we see today is an evolution of family that we assume is "the way it's always been" and religion will force feed a version throughout the rest of time. And that version will invariably change.

Here's a simple example of how scripture used to tell men and women who has to do what only works if we ignore some key truths. Women have been sidelines in families in many ways through history. In those times they must of forgotten about Deborah who was literally in charge of ALL Israel as a Judge. And when one of her male military leaders pushed her to accompany them to battle she let him know, as a message from God, that her presence will ensure that the victory will be credited to a woman...and not even herself at that.

We see in the letters often Paul citing women in greetings who are leaders in the church. On one hand you can find passages that put women in a second class place, but there are also these keys. Phoebe is a deacon and bankrolled Paul's ministry as well as likely some congregations. Priscilla is given at least equal billing to her husband Aquila. Junia is listed as an apostle. This puts her on equal footing with Paul, Peter, John and the others. And she wasn't the only one! Yes, women were allowed to lead men. To teach, preach, and so on.

Look at family today. It's changed. How many women work outside the home? How many couples make the choice to NOT have kids? How many unfortunately are unable even if they want children?

I watch families and hear conversations among spouses. Women have just as strong a voice as the men many if not most times. Sometimes they are even stronger in leading the household. There is a more accepted equality

in the relationship.

You'll have some Christians who will make a big fuss about the prescribed "roles" in a marriage but in practice they don't follow them themselves. And they always have reasons backing it up. Frequently good reasons. The "prescription" isn't working. Largely because they are looking at the wrong prescription.

Who does what and why? We have so many different versions of family today. Single parent households. We have blended families because there has been divorce or death. Adoptions bring together people who aren't connected by blood yet family is created. I have a friend who out of necessity adopted. They adopted a beautiful little girl from Africa. That's not "traditional" but they have an incredible family. Grandparents step in to raise grandchildren. Some families don't have the male/female split as authorities or parental figures. Automatically when I say that many people want to jump over to the issue of gay marriage. But we also have families where it's two uncles raising their nieces or nephews. Or two aunts. It might be a father and older son raising together the younger children in the home. We have foster families to step in when the family by blood breaks down. And here's the issue. Have you met families that look like what we might call a "traditional" family and the family is a place of disfunction, anger, and harm for those involved? Have you met families that we might call "nontraditional" that are havens of love, and where everyone is uplifted and growing in health and wholeness? Maybe the ideal isn't the nuts and bolts prescription. Maybe it's more fundamental than that.

Ruth and Naomi teach us a lot of what to do even as many of the other families in scripture show us what not to do. Ruth and Naomi absolutely constitute family. They don't look like the typical family in any Biblical sense yet they are. Ruth is Moabite and Naomi Israelite. They weren't supposed to mix. They were supposed to be enemies.

Circumstance drove Naomi and her husband to Moab for food. They settle there long enough for their sons to marry Moabite women. When all the men in the family died Naomi sets the daughters in law loose but Ruth refuses to go. And here is what we see that takes this nontraditional family of two women and turns them into a model.

They agree together to love one another. Ruth agrees to live in commitment with Naomi and gives herself to Naomi's God. They watch out for each other. The younger Ruth when they return to Israel goes out to work and gather food so that they can live. Naomi advises Ruth how to navigate a strange new culture and people. Together they each figure out what their part is in their little family and ultimately Ruth finds a husband in Boaz. Their meeting and marriage was anything other than what we would call "traditional". The "wedding" was Boaz handing a shoe to one of his kin to essentially claim Ruth as his property. Yet somehow even that worked. It was successful enough for Ruth to make it into the bloodline of Jesus.

This is the prescription for family and it is fundamental to how every believer in Jesus Christ is called to be across the board. We give ourselves to one another. We learn to work together. We recognize the wonderful gifts and talents in one another and cultivate them. It's never about forcing you to be like me. It's encouraging you to be the best and most faithful YOU that you can be. Family puts one another first. Family forgives and lets go.

Certainly there is authority in a household. What does that look like? Well that depends on the household. What is clear is that the ones who are in charge regard one another and exercise that authority in a way that builds up everyone in the family. That includes encouragement and accountability. And again, no two families are the same. Trying to force you to live like me might not work in your situation.

But the realities of love, and cooperation, respect, and faith are present no matter what.

Of course we haven't gotten to a place of perfection yet. And we have rifts and brokenness that occur. As it says in Romans "as much as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone". And so we do our best so far as it depends on us.

This is also why we expand the idea of family to include so many people who aren't related by blood. All of us have people that we consider family in this way. It is proof that family is about relationships perhaps even more than it is by blood. Family is built and forged through time and shared experience.

We use family terms in church, particularly depending on the tradition. "Brother". "Sister". Spiritual mothers and fathers. Scripture is clear that the community of faith is intended to forge bonds of family. And once again, the "prescription" is the same. Love each other. Watch out for each other. Forgive each other. Care for one another's needs. Spend time together. Get to know one another and encourage each other for the unique gift that God has placed in every one of us.

Faith is an important component of family. Not the oppressive, controlling kind of faith we see too often. The kind of faith that connects us and sees the God in each of us. Having a common focus on Jesus Christ gives us a common example. It is also a common accountability. I don't get to exercise whatever my role in family or otherwise, no matter my age, without the same foundational expectation of everyone else. Am I conducting myself

in accordance with the teaching and witness of Jesus Christ?

Like family in the home, the family in faith has to do the same thing. We have to show up for one another. We have to spend time together. If we want our children, no matter their age, to live into the faith we claim to hold dear we have to set the example. I can't expect you to hold something dear just because I say so. I have to step forward and demonstrate it in my own life with practice and conviction. If I want you to show up I have to show up myself.

I want to encourage you this morning to bind together with your family at home and your family here in this congregation.

Here's your prescription: Take time with one another. Slow down life so that good, quality time can be spent with each other. Make time for the things that really matter. Show up. If there is a rift ask if whatever it is is worth the tension in the relationship. Find forgiveness both asked and offered. Put in the work of building up. Show everyone around you what it looks like to put Christ in the driver's seat and invite them to do the same.

Scripture tells us that a "house divided against itself can't stand." I invite you to embrace your, and our, unique set of circumstances and live into them with the kind of faithfulness we see in Ruth and Naomi. Binding together for a house united, strong, and building a future that will continue to bring Christ into the world for generations to come.

#### BIBLE STUDY 1 Timothy 4

This letter continues on in many ways with more of the same. Timothy is encouraged to weed out false stories and myths. He is encouraged to hold strong to his own faith, setting an example for others to follow. He is encouraged to stay with his calling. Peppered in this chapter is the consequences for doing the above or not. One is salvation and benefit to him and others. The others is that he deprives others of growth, perhaps salvation, and will cheat himself out of peace and maybe even his own redemption.

There are a few things to highlight here that might continue to be helpful.

Over and over in this letter myths, fables, and the like are lifted up as a problem. We don't have specifics about what they were. Given that this is a Gentile church in a Gentile area it can be assumed that the adult converts were coming from pagan traditions. That they would hang on to some of their old beliefs isn't a shock. It's natural they would make their way into their new faith. They also distract and give false ideas of God, Christ, and a life of faith. Whatever they were, they needed to be squelched.

We might be tempted to think that we've moved beyond this. The only difference today is that myths and fables have been bred inside the church by lifelong people of faith. Don't believe me?

Belief that a cardinal is a visit from a deceased loved one

Believe that "God will get you" if you step out of line, as in immediate whammy from above

Belief that no baptism=no salvation, or that the "wrong" baptism "doesn't count"

Belief that Satan rules over hell and administers punishments

Belief that not speaking in tongues is a question mark on one's salvation

Looking for "666" as an actual worn mark (this is just a symbolic way of saying crafting your full identity to a government rather than Christ. 666 meant the emperor Nero who was their present enemy in power. To bend to Nero, or any other ruling power up unto today is to deny Christ. Who is the Nero of today in your opinion?)

Saying "God needed another angel" as words of comfort to someone who has lost a loved one.

All of these and many more are Christian inventions that don't have any bearing in honest scripture. We have to be on the watch for "fables" and "myths" now more than ever because often they are packaged with Jesus' name on them.

We also see reasoning why many scholars think someone other than Paul may have written this letter. The beginning of the chapter is in keeping with Paul's notion that they were living in the "last days". This is why it was so important to keep the messaging tight. If Jesus was coming back any second they couldn't risk watering things down and getting off track.

However in 1 Corinthians Paul writes about marriage and food which are specifically mentioned here. Paul doesn't forbid marriage but he is very strong against it. Again, because he believed Jesus was coming back in his lifetime. To marry was to divide allegiance and attention. To have children moreso. And if Jesus is ending it all anyway, why do we need to keep the human race going?

Paul's only reason for allowing marriage was pretty crass. He said if they couldn't control their sexual urges, then get married. Not for family. So they could have sex without it being sinful. That's it.

In many ways it sounds like Paul is at least a good way against the warning against "forbidding marriage."

Paul also in that same letter instructs people to abstain from foods that would get in the way of someone else's

faith. Particularly he talked about meat offered to idols. Some thought it sinful to eat that food. He said he'd rather never eat meat again rather than cause someone's faith to compromise by his example. Again, not a full on explicit command. Still, it is clear that Paul is recommending abstinence from anything that would get in the way of a fellow believer's faith.

This seems to some extent at odds with this very direct and complete command in the letter to Timothy. Certainly there are "workaround" people can come up with. I'm just reminding us that what we read in scripture can sometimes be a bit confusing. Sometimes Occam's Razor is the best method (the simplest explanation is usually the most correct). Why do these things seem so different? Maybe they were written by different people.

The final thing I'd like to touch on is a caution for all of us. It's directed at false teachers but it has great wisdom for every believer. The famous expression "consciences seared with a hot iron" is familiar.

Any of us can have this happen. It occurs whenever we have dug in so deep on something that we are unable to be persuaded. Even by the truth. That's the problem here. These teachers either were so persuaded that they wouldn't change their minds or their concern had nothing to do with the people they were misguiding.

None of us have a perfect understanding of God, Jesus, or scripture. That's why life is such an ongoing journey of growth and an adventure. We discover over and over more and more. At times that discovery is affirming to what we know. Others it corrects us and draws us closer to God by revealing truth we hadn't grasped before.

If our conscience is seared we can't be taught. We don't want to be taught. We just want to hang onto what we think we know. Does that cause harm to others that we bring in to our falsehoods? We don't care. What's more important is me being right.

This may have been the problem for Timothy's church.

For us the opposite needs to be true. Teachability is critical. Letting go of wrong ideas to make room for the right ones is essential. Because all of it is about knowing Christ more and living that faith more fully. As it says in this chapter, our ability to do this isn't just about ourselves. It's also about everyone we influence along the way.