Book 10

Sunday October 25, 1981

"ALL IN THE FAMILY" Luke 2:41-52

We don't know very much about the family life of Jesus. The only story about him as a young boy is the one just read from the Gospel of Luke. However, in the last verse of the story this revealing statement is made--"And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and people." He must've had a strong and supportive family life.

Today however, we're told over and over again that the family is in crisis. Concerned people are asking everywhere--what can be done to solve the family's problems?

But to solve a problem, one must first ask the right question. "How many miles can I sail before my ship falls off the end of the world?" This question was a terrifying one to ancient seafarers and one that puzzled people until the time of Columbus. But it was the wrong question. Columbus asked instead, "How far must I sail from my western shore before I arrive at my eastern coast?" And the discoveries that followed made the old question about "falling off the earth"irrelevant.

During the 14th century, millions of Europeans died from the "black plague," and they asked, "Why is God displeased with us?" The answer they got was, "because of our many sins." So the authorities ordered that everything that could possibly anger God, such as gambling, cursing and drinking must be stopped. But it didn't help because they had asked the wrong question in the first place. Five-hundred years passed before Louis Pasteur asked the right question: "What are the tiny organisms that carry the black plague?" That question led to the right answer--an organism that traveled in the stomach of the flea and the bloodstream of the rat. And that question and answer brought an end to the black plague. So many times we ask the wrong question and therefore get the wrong answer. We need to spend more time in formulating the right question.

Thus in relation to the family--to inquire, "Why is the family falling apart?" or "What's wrong with the family?" is as pointless as asking "How far till I fall off the ocean?" or "Why is God sending us the plague?" I believe the right question about the family is--"Why are families

changing?" We're going to look at some answers to that question in a minute. But in addition to not often asking the right question, there's another problem in relation to the family that often gets in our way, and that is that we tend to idealize the past. That's why some people always talk about the good old days.

Take divorce, for example. We like to think that in the good old days there was little or no divorce--marriages were stable. But were they? It is true that there were relatively few legal divorces prior to the civil war. It's also true that the frequency of divorce has been growing ever since. But historians are uncovering increasing evidence for the "poor man's" or "poor woman's" divorce.

Throughout colonial times and during the 19th century expansion of the western frontier, it was exceedingly simple for men especially--but also for women--to slip away from their families undetected and never return. And it was almost impossible to trace them. There were no social security numbers, no FBI, no computers, no effective way to track down someone who left a family in Ohio, and took off for California. While the actual number of desertions are unknown, they are thought to be substantial. And since no one knew you when you arrived in California, you could claim to be unmarried, and then remarry without anyone ever being able to trace your former family connections.

In this century there have been many more legal divorces for a number of reasons, but one factor is that it's harder to drop out and resurface again without being detected. The point is, that when we look longingly to the past and say, "My wasn't it grand when marriages were stable," we have to face the hard fact that they weren't nearly as stable as we like to think.

We also like to think that our ancestors had harmonious and happy families and that the violence so characteristic of contemporary families did not exist. However, social historians are becoming increasingly aware of just how much violence went on in pre-20th century families.

While a great deal of violence occurs today, there was probably more of it during earlier times because there was greater community support for it. A "good" husband

routinely beat his wife to keep her in subjection. "Good" parents often beat their children in order to get the devil or sin-nature out of them.

A book published a few years ago entitled, "The Little Darlings, A History of Child Rearing in America," by Mary Cable, is filled with examples of child-rearing practices which we today would consider terrible. Dr. John Witherspoon, the influential 18th century expert on children had some simple advice on how to establish parental authority over 8 month old infants--"Once a day take something from them."

We are also told that every morning of his childhood in the same century, Josiah Quincy was taken into the cellar of his Boston house and plunged into a tub of cold spring water. That was mostly because John Locke, the British philosopher, whose advice on children guided thousands of American parents, thought cold water built good children. Locke also feared that children whose feet weren't used to cold water could get sick from occasional wet feet. His answer was to encourage frequent wet feet.

As in modern times, new fashions in parental panaceas breezed in and out of every generation. Aaron Burr warned his daughter that her "vile habit," bad posture, was bound to cause tuberculosis. A southern school teacher believed in beating each new student until he or she either fainted or vomited. As late as the 19th century some parents regularly whipped nursing infants on the assumption that they were born depraved and were therefore thinking lies.

Family violence is not a new problem--it has been around for a long time, and the past was probably worse than the present.

Today some critics of the family complain that mothers go to work and leave their children with sitters or in nursery schools and when they're home, parents plunk their children down in front of the TV. The charge is that parents don't relate to their children as they used to.

Here again, historians are helping us to sort fact from fiction. Take for example the idea of working mothers. Prior to the industrial revolution, most women were married to farmers or shopkeepers. They worked with the men from

dawn to dusk and simply had little time for full-time motherhood. But who took care of the children while mothers and fathers and all other able-bodied adults struggled to survive economically? The truth is that no one gave the matter much thought. Any available adult or older brother or sister who happened to be around when the child needed something did what had to be done for the child.

But the idea that the child is a special person requiring extra-ordinary attention, nurture and care never entered anyone's mind. Only in recent times has there been concern about child development. Courses of instruction such as "Parent Effectiveness Training," which we offer here twice each year taught by John Smeltzer, were unheard of. Parents by and large repeated the same mistakes their parents had made.

The good old days in regard to the family, were not so good after all.

But the family is changing--and we are back to our basic question--why is it changing? One over-all answer to this question is that there has emerged in our culture a developing concern for the rights, privileges and well-being of the individual as over against the unquestioned maintenance of traditions.

In the past, marriages and families were often seen as being useful primarily for the perpetuation of families and the preservation of property.

Most of us have seen the movie or the musical on stage--"Fiddler on the Roof." Tevye, the village milkman, struggles with tradition versus freedom. On the one hand, he says, parents should arrange their children's marriages. But on the other hand, he sympathizes with the freedom sought by his daughters to choose their own husbands, to marry the men they love. He is at the same time upset by the erosion of tradition. It almost seems as if the whole of family and society ar collapsing around him and then his youngest daughter decides to marry a gentile instead of a Jew.

So the family is changing and most of the changes are resulting from the erosion of ancient traditions--but it's not all negative by any means. The family was made for

human beings, not human beings for the family, just as Jesus reminded us that the Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. As early as the 17th century, John Milton insisted that God did not create human beings for marriage, rather God created marriage for human beings, for human benefit. Therefore, said Milton, how much sense does it make to assert that a loving God forces people to suffer in an arrangement that God originally designed for their happiness.

The individual has rights as well as the institution of marriage having rights. This recognition is causing some changes in the family. Take family violence as an example. While it is probably true that the family remains the most violent institution in American society, there are changes at work. The individual is coming to be valued as highly as the institution. Although wife-beating has apparently always been common, it was in earlier times accepted as being a "normal" part of family life--but not any more. As long as women accepted that tradition, they never complained openly about their beatings, nor did they seek help. But that tradition is being eroded. It is being replaced with the idea that protecting a woman's body and mind is more important than holding a family together and letting the violence continue. Violence need not be tolerated for the sake of perpetuating a marriage.

Today virtually every city in America has a shelter where battered women can go to flee their husbands. In many cases the husband pursues his wife and wants her back, not that he intends to stop beating her, but chiefly because he insists on holding the family together. But more and more women are rejecting the idea that the family itself is more important, no matter how violent. Furthermore the violence that has been hidden for centuries is finally being talked about and emerging into public view.

Children no longer can be abused as they used to. More and more child abuse is coming to light and steps are being taken to prevent it. There is probably no more child abuse today than there ever was, in fact there's probably less, but we hear about it more and society is taking steps to bring it to a halt. Parents no longer have the right to beat up on their children when they want to.

I believe that the desire of growing numbers of married women to seek fulfillment also through activities outside

the household can be a great boon to them and to their children, if alongside this trend there occurs a corresponding move to bring the men into the household, and to involve them as fully as possible in child care and nurture.

The family is changing and much of the change is for good reason and we should affirm it. The marriage vows which men and women take are the same and equal. What we in the church need to work for is to balance the well-being of the institution of marriage and the family with the well-being of the individuals who are part of the family. In that way we will continue to strengthen the family.

The ideal family situation is one that provides maximum opportunities for all of its members to love and to work, where its members can increase in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and others.

Also we need to realize that there are many forms which the family can take and can still be a loving, caring, happy place where the individuals, including the adults, grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and others.

Thus there will be some families where the husband is the chief bread winner; still other families where both parents work outside the home; single parent families; families without children in the home. There will continue to be diversity in family makeup as there always has been, but what needs to be constant is the loving and caring for each other and the nurturing that goes with it.

In our time the most important thing is to continue to seek to find the proper balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the family group.

The United Church of Christ nationally has chosen "Family Life" along with world peace, as top priorities for the next four years. We in this congregation are going to be making those priorities our own as seek to strengthen family life here in our parish and work for peace in the world.