Sunday, April 25, 1993
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND FAMILY VALUES (No. 1 in the Series: Why are Family Values Changing?)
I John 4:7-12; Mark 2:23-28

There's a lot of talk about the family and family values these days. For the past 12 years, long before the last Presidential election, I've been keeping a file on articles and newspaper accounts on family issues. It's filled with all kinds of news stories and reports. Then a few weeks ago, when The Atlantic magazine published its cover story on family issues, almost every newspaper in the country responded with articles and editorials.

Last Friday afternoon, April 16, I was the keynote speaker at the Nebraska State PTA Convention here in Lincoln, and the theme of the convention was, "Children and Families First, Let Us Give You a Hand." My speech was titled, "Another Look at Family Values." Some of the research I did for that address you'll hear recycled in this sermon series.

In a remarkable coincidence, as soon as I finished my talk on Friday, my wife and I, our oldest daughter, and her three children headed for a family wedding and reunion in Washington, Missouri. It was a seven-hour drive of "family togetherness." The son of one of my many double cousins was being married there. Attending the wedding were my brother, four sisters, and almost all of their children and grandchildren from across the country, in addition to many second cousins and more distant relatives. I saw people that I hadn't seen in years. As part of the trip, we spent some time before the wedding ceremony on Saturday driving around the small town where I was born. Since our oldest daughter was with us, I wanted to show her again the cemetery where my parents and grandparents are buried, the house in which I was born, and several more houses where I grew up. We also visited the family farm, which is now a subdivision of homes, and drove past another farm which used to be owned by my mother's parents.

It's significant, I think, that almost all of my great-grandparents, grandparents, parents, and my aunts and uncles never moved or lived in any place more than five miles from where they were born. But in my generation, we live all across the country, and each move has been a significant one in distance. Of course, I realize that many of your ancestors and mine, a few generations ago, came to this country from a longer distance. They were immigrants from other countries. But after that one big move, they tended, in earlier generations, to stay together in one place.

It's one very important reason why families are changing, not only in this country but around the world. We live in an increasingly mobile society brought on by the industrial revolution, better transportation, and the growth of large urban centers. Family life is different because we live farther away from our larger extended families. A natural support system has been weakened. More about this later.

However, before we examine some additional reasons why families are changing and will continue to change, let's talk about the phrase "traditional family values." I have deliberately not used the word "traditional" in the title of the sermon series because there are many different kinds of traditions as far as families are concerned. It all depends on what culture the family exists in and in what period of history. "Values" is another word that needs careful definition. We all have values; however, some are good, and some are bad. Both traditions and values are constantly changing.

There have been cultures in the past, and there are still some in the present, where a very high value is placed on having male children in the family and a low value on female babies. For them, it's a "traditional family value." It's even been the case that such a high value was placed on male babies that female babies were sometimes put to death immediately after birth.

Another traditional family value in some cultures in the past and in some in the present is to have the parents, usually the fathers, choose the mate for each of their children, sometimes by employing a professional matchmaker and other times by arranging the deals themselves. Women were considered property to be bartered. This tradition can be found in the Old Testament of the Bible. To be married to someone with whom you were romantically in love was unusual unless you were just plain lucky in the mate chosen for you. When we talk about returning to "traditional family values," is that one we want to recover?

When people call for a return to "traditional family values," I first want to know which traditions and whose values they are talking about. Usually, that phrase is used to conjure up the image of a former time when the family was strong and life was good. It holds up the promise that we can bring back those good times if we return to these traditional family values. Certainly, there are many traditions and values from the past that need to be protected and preserved, but there are others, some of which I have already mentioned, that need to be discarded.

Sometimes when I ask individuals which traditional family values they want to preserve, they answer, "Those in the Biblical and Christian tradition." They assume there is one single tradition. However, in the Biblical tradition, there are at least six different types of family structures or traditions, each with its own values, some good and some bad. The patriarchal model is the most prominent one, where the husband and father is the authority which all others must obey. In the Old Testament, there is, in addition, the tradition of polygamy, but few among us would want to re-establish that. In the New Testament, St. Paul held up celibacy as preferable to marriage.

Also, before we go any further in this sermon series, I want to define the term "family" as we'll be using it. For the purposes of this sermon series, I will be limiting the definition of family to a parent, or preferably two parents, and one or more children. Of course, a married couple without children is also a family, as are widows and single people.

Webster's dictionary defines "family" this way: (1) A social unit consisting of a man and a woman and their offspring. (2) A group of people sharing common ancestry. (3) All members of a household.

Now let's return to the main subject of this first sermon in this series. To solve any problem or get the right answer, one must first ask the right question. During the 14th century, millions of Europeans died from the Black Plague. "Why is God displeased with us?" they asked. The answer they got was, "Our sin." The authorities ordered that everything that could anger God, such as gambling, cursing, and drinking, must be stopped. But the Black Plague continued. To ask why God was displeased was the wrong question. Five hundred years passed before Louis Pasteur asked the right question: "What are those tiny organisms that carry the Black Plague?" That question led him to the right answer — an organism that traveled in the stomach of the flea and in the bloodstream of the rat. And that answer brought a solution to the Black Plague.

Similarly, to ask, “What’s wrong with the family?” is as pointless as asking, “Why is God sending us the plague?” The question to ask if we want to improve the quality of family life and keep families together has to be a broader one, namely, “Why are families changing?” Until we understand that, we can’t make any corrections or guide the change. We have already noted that one reason families are changing is because society is changing. We are no longer primarily a rural, agricultural society of farms and small towns, where people tended to live in one place for several generations. We live in an increasingly mobile, urban society. Furthermore, as we moved from a rural, agricultural society to an urban, industrial one, the economic value of children declined, and people had fewer of them.

As the production of goods and services shifted from the home to the factory or the office, women were drawn into the labor market, thereby becoming more independent of men. And as the school, the hospital, and the old-age home took over many of the functions family members used to perform for each other, men and women found it progressively easier to live nontraditional family lives.

Second, families and the kinds of values that families uphold are changing because there has been and continues to be an increasing emphasis on an individual’s right to develop his or her own potential and destiny, even when it goes against a traditional family value from the past.

Here’s an illustration from Japan. When Tosh Wada was growing up in a small town about 85 miles from Tokyo, family ties were iron-clad. Divorce hardly existed. Eldest sons typically lived at home, raising their children under the same roof as their grandparents. The community itself resembled an extended family; residents vigilantly monitored the behavior of everyone’s children, and incidents of theft and vandalism were virtually non-existent. (It sounds like the small town in Missouri where I grew up.)

But Tosh, who left his hometown to pursue a career as a symphony conductor and author in the United States, recalls that the safety and security of his hometown exacted a price. “Yes, the family was tightly knit,” he says, “But as a result, there was enormous pressure on the family. That pressure kept my folks together, even though they did not get along well. And I had to break away from the tradition of the eldest son remaining in the household if I wanted to develop my own potential — so I guess I’m looked at as a not-so-good citizen because I am not upholding traditional Japanese family values.”

And therein lies the two-pronged dilemma that faces traditional family values in all cultures. Exactly what, within the context of a particular culture, constitutes a worthwhile family value? And how can so-called traditional values be reconciled with a rapidly changing society?

Here’s another example of what can happen when an individual’s perception of his or her traditional role in a family collides with reality. In cultures where a woman’s universe of accomplishment is limited to motherhood, population control becomes a tough sell.

An educator from another country who was living temporarily in the African nation of Senegal recalls meeting a young unemployed man with a wife and two children, all of whom were approaching the edge of starvation. The husband and wife had been advised to delay expanding their family for obvious reasons. But the wife, who knew no other role or reward in life than motherhood, secretly poked holes in her husband’s state-supplied condoms so that she would once again become pregnant.

Families are changing, and one of the main reasons is that there has been a continuing and growing movement worldwide for the rights, privileges, and well-being of the individual, and this frequently comes into conflict with other traditions. This development is brilliantly illustrated in the musical 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 experiences enormous dissonance coping with the erosion of tradition; he sees the whole of family and society collapsing around him, culminating finally in the decision of his youngest daughter to marry a Gentile rather than a Jew.

It’s a question all families face. What’s most important: the individual family member’s freedom to determine as much as possible his or her own destiny, or preserving the traditions of the family as an institution? In the 17th century, John Milton insisted that God did not create human beings for marriage; rather, God created marriage and the family 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 human happiness? “No sense at all,” he concluded, arguing that churches and the government of his day should allow divorce on the grounds of what we now call “mutual incompatibility.”

Today, virtually every city in America has a shelter where battered women and children can go to flee their husbands and fathers. In many cases, the husband pursues his wife and wants her back, not that he intends to stop abusing her, but chiefly because he insists on holding the family together. But women are rejecting the idea that the family itself is more important than one’s own physical well-being, and the violence that had been hidden for centuries is being talked about and emerging into public view. The underlying change that is taking place is away from the tradition that made the family preeminent over the individual and gave the man unquestioned authority over his wife — all in the name of family stability. And in the place of those former traditions, the care of the woman’s mind and body and of her human dignity have come to be regarded as more significant than the institution itself.

The broader question which all of us face throughout life and never completely resolve is: Are individuals made for institutions, or institutions for individuals? Are we made to serve the government, or is the government made to serve us? When do an individual’s basic human rights and dignity take precedence over an institution’s stability?

Jesus faced this question over and over. “Are human beings made for the Sabbath, or is the Sabbath made for human beings?” he asked. In Jesus’ time, the Sabbath was the most powerful institution of all. There were more rules, regulations, and traditions regarding how it was to be observed than anything else in the Hebrew faith. Jesus’ answer was, “The Sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

Jesus was not for doing away with the Sabbath; however, he was saying that a sense of balance was needed. Therefore, for example, it was all right to heal someone on the Sabbath, even though that was breaking the Sabbath rule of doing work. Jesus saw that there could come to exist a healthy balance between the basic human rights and needs of the individual and the necessity for maintaining a strong institution.

Marriage and the new family that is formed when marriage takes place is an institution of high value in our society. Children need loving and secure places if they are to grow up to be mature and emotionally healthy individuals. To do this means we have to be continually

working to seek the proper balance between the needs of the individuals in a family and the strength of the family as a whole. More next week on how to do this. Amen.