Sunday, May 2, 1993
THE CHRISTIAN FAITH AND FAMILY VALUES (No. 2 in a Series: How to Have a Healthy Family in a Changing World)
I Corinthians 13

"There's trouble in the family." That statement, whispered across the kitchen table at the family reunion or announced by Aunt Minnie over the telephone, fills us with sadness, fear, and sometimes even guilt. It's news we try to keep within the family. Yes, there's trouble in the family, or to put it another way, the family is in trouble — the family as a unit, not only in this country but in many other countries around the world.

I could give you all sorts of statistics on the increasing divorce rate and, as a result, more and more single parents, too many teenagers who are having children and are not married, the problem of getting fathers to pay child support, and the violence that is taking place in families, including battered wives and abused children. Add to this runaways, alcohol and drug abuse, and suicide among young people.

What can be done about it? Last week in the first sermon in this series on "The Christian Faith and Family Values," the primary focus was on the question, "Why are families and family values changing?" Until we come to some understanding of the answers to that question, we cannot begin to find solutions. It's not enough merely to criticize single-parent families or to point out that statistically the dissolution of two-parent families is harmful to large numbers of children, or that the increasing numbers of single-parent and stepparent families weaken and undermine society.

Nor is it enough to blame television programs and other media. By doing this, we tend to excuse ourselves. One editorial I read recently claimed that too many people see "out-of-wedlock births as cute" and that others view divorce as some routine minor annoyance, the equivalent of choosing a long-distance telephone operator. That's not been my experience. The people I know who consider and go through a divorce find it to be an agonizing, painful, heart-rending experience. They see it as a personal failure and tragedy. They do not take it lightly.

To try to restigmatize divorce or single parenthood is not the way to improve society or lower the divorce rate. The problem is much deeper, and there are no simple, easy answers.

It's also not enough to call for a return to "traditional family values." We first have to ask, which tradition and which values? Furthermore, traditions and values are always changing. It's not possible to freeze one period of history unless you want to live like the "Old Order Amish."

That's why I began the sermon series last week with the deeper question, "Why are family values and families changing?"

Here's a quick review for those of you who didn't hear the sermon last week or perhaps have forgotten the main points.

I noted first that family values throughout history are always changing and that family values never exist in a vacuum but always grow out of the larger and broader cultural values.

For example, we no longer live primarily in a rural, agricultural society of farms and small towns where everybody knew everyone else, and in addition to the parents, the village raised the children. Now we are mostly an urban, industrial, technological society, and very mobile.

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, retirement homes, and nursing homes took over many of the functions family members used to perform for each other, men and women found it progressively easier to live non-traditional family lives, and more choices were made available.

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 or societal value from the past.

For example, increasing numbers of women want their marriages to help their occupational efforts in the same way that marriages have made it possible for men to pursue their careers. In The Wall Street Journal on Tuesday, April 13, there was a front-page story about the family changes that are coming about in this country as more men become "trailing spouses." Many men, according to this article, are unable to find a job when their wife is relocated, and this causes all kinds of family stresses and even divorce. For many men, it means a complete role reversal that goes against a long cultural history of the husband as the breadwinner of the family and therefore also the boss.

Many individuals have become so submerged in "traditional" family roles that when these roles begin to change because of societal changes, they find it almost impossible to do so, and they lose their self-esteem because it is tied to the role and does not grow out of a deeper source.

The secret is to balance the well-being of the institution of the family with the well-being of the individuals who make it up. More about this later.

There's one more cultural value which I didn't have time to mention in last week's sermon, which is also affecting the family and family values in a negative way. Remember, the change in some of our cultural values is good, but there are others that need to be resisted and overcome.

In the recent past and in the present, our culture is placing an increasingly high value on instant and personal gratification, on having all of our wants and desires satisfied now. We are told continually that we do not need to wait for anything. We can not only have it all now, but we are told that we deserve it now.

To put it another way, as widely accepted values, sacrifice for children, for the good of the community, and general self-denial and discipline are declining while the pursuit of self-gratification is increasing. Studies in consumer spending show that the trend means consumers are willing to spend more and more on "me" items but willing to spend less money on "we" items, and it can all be done on borrowed money, on time payments. Waiting until you have the money saved up to pay for something you want very much is out of style in the same way as waiting to have sex until one is married and the two people have made a commitment to each other is out of style. We want everything now.

Those people in our culture who are willing to delay gratification and to make a distinction between wants and needs are considered odd. Listen to this letter to Abby.

“Dear Abby: We live in one of the best neighborhoods in town. There is not one house on our block worth less than $100,000. Some new neighbors moved in next door, and I understand they bought the house for the asking price and paid cash. They seem very nice, but they are weird. The first thing we noticed was that they didn’t have a television antenna, so my little boy asked their little boy about it, and he was told they didn’t have a television set. They have only one automobile, and the children walk to school. They rarely go anywhere except to church. The wife doesn’t have any fancy clothes or jewelry or furs. The children aren’t permitted to have any toys dealing with violence. Could they belong to some offbeat religious cult? What do you make of them?”

In light of these continual cultural changes that affect the family, what are some things we can do as Christians in order to have a strong and healthy family?

First of all, as Christians, we need to remember that in some values, we need to be counter-cultural. Thus, we’ve got to do everything in our power and with the help of the power of God to resist the temptation for instant self-gratification. It’s not only okay to practice deferred gratification, but it can strengthen our individual characters as well as that of our families. For example, one of the reasons for marriage failures is that some people get married too soon and too young. The younger you are when you are married, the more the probability of a divorce.
Children are not born with the ability to wait for needs, wants, or pleasures. It has to be modeled and taught by the parents and other significant adults in their lives. And unless children as they are growing up learn to tolerate delay, they will have a difficult time throughout their lives coping with frustration. The emotionally healthy child is one who has learned that there are times when he or she simply has to wait and that, in the long run, this can be a positive experience. One person who had learned how to deal with disappointment in life said, “Everything my mother did and said somehow got the message across that we would succeed eventually, no matter how tough things were for us at the moment.”

Practicing delayed gratification also means learning to distinguish between “needs” and “wants.” There are a lot of things we want, but that does not mean we need them. I believe that far too many high school students have their own cars, not because they need them, but because they want them.

Second, because how work is done and how goods and services are produced are going to continue to change, the roles of family members will also keep on changing. I believe much of this change in the long run can be healthy and is in line with our Christian faith.
For example, the basic trend of changing relationships and roles between husbands and wives can be simultaneously beneficial not only to them but also to the well-being of their children. The desire of growing numbers of women to seek autonomy and economic security outside the household can be a great boon to children if, alongside this trend, there occurs a corresponding move to bring fathers into the household and to involve them as fully as mothers in child care and nurture.

Husbands, hopefully, will learn to become fathers who do more than pay for the new sneakers but also fathers who help change diapers, do homework assignments, and look after a sick child. It takes tremendous courage for many men to face society and say, “I have some responsibilities for my children and wife that I must attend to. I will not give all of my life and

soul to my work or to my hobbies." The willingness of men to take such a stand is one of the most hopeful signs of the present time. I have never yet seen an epitaph on a tombstone of a man which said, "I wish that I had spent more time at the office."

Our Christian faith teaches us that in our families as well as in our society as a whole, no one is primarily an appendage of another; through the accident of being born male or female, no one is inherently superior or inferior to anyone else. Our Biblical tradition affirms the balance in creation, the equal balance between men and women. God creates male and female in God's own image; one is not subservient to the other. Healthy families respect the dignity and worth of each individual.

Third, a few years back, a comprehensive study was done in order to discover the basic positive values of a healthy family. I was not surprised to learn that all healthy families have them. Some of these I have already mentioned. Here are the others. All of these are timeless and grow out of our Christian faith. Any change in them needs to be resisted at all costs. One major finding was that as a societal unit, the family's most important function has shifted from economic survival to emotional sustenance.

Good emotional nurturing is the most important of all.

Healthy families are defined by their quality of caring. Without deep care for its members, the family breeds hurting, limping people. With deep care and such traits as mutual trust, respect, and support, the family helps produce balanced, compassionate persons.

Healthy families expect problems and deal with them in a caring way. They work together. What stands out in these families is their sense of optimism and their willingness to listen, communicate, support, and affirm each other.

Healthy families are also noted for encouraging individual feelings and independent thinking. "The healthier the family, the better able it is to accept differing opinions in its midst," the study showed.

Naturally, I was not surprised to learn from this study of strong and healthy families that having a strong religious base ranked very high. Families are healthier overall when they participate actively in a church.

Healthy families have fun together. They have learned to glorify God and enjoy God and each other. More next week. Amen.