Sunday, May 9, 1993
MOTHERHOOD AND FAMILY VALUES (No. 3 in a Series: The Christian Faith and Family Values)
Matthew 12:46-50

Why are families changing in our society? What are some of the healthy values from our Christian faith that can strengthen the family, and what are some of the unhealthy values from our culture that are weakening the family? These are some of the issues that I've been discussing in this sermon series on the Christian faith and family values.

Here's a quick review before we continue with today's sermon. Why are families changing? Families are changing because the ways in which we live and work are changing. When we lived in a primarily agricultural, rural, and small-town economy, families did not move very often or very far. Therefore, family life had a certain stability. The roles which mothers, fathers, husbands, and wives fulfilled were well-defined and not often questioned. Very few wives and mothers were employed in jobs outside the home. Everyone had a job to do in the home because the family was also an economic unit.

However, we now live in an increasingly mobile society brought on by the industrial revolution and now the continuing technological revolution. This has resulted in the growth of large urban centers. Family life is different because we tend to live farther away from our larger extended families. A natural support system has been weakened.

As the production of goods and services shifted from the home to the factory or the office, women have been increasingly drawn into work outside the home, thereby becoming more independent of men. Furthermore, schools, hospitals, and nursing homes have taken over many of the functions which family members used to perform for each other. Since the family is no longer a basic economic unit, children and young people are no longer needed to do chores at home in order for the family to survive.

The nine-month school year, which has become traditional in many places, was originally that way so that children and young people could help out with the farm work in the summer. Now we have difficulty finding enough creative and productive activities for many young people in the summer months, especially in large cities.

Another reason families are changing is that there has been, and continues to be, a growing awareness worldwide for the rights, privileges, and well-being of the individual to make many of his or her own choices about the future — whether to marry or not marry, how many children to have, and the career or vocation he or she wants to pursue. Sometimes these decisions come into conflict with more traditional male or female roles and with personal family traditions. Then the question arises: "Are individuals made for the family, or is the family made for the individual?" Finding the balance between the two often causes stress.

Because of new stresses brought on by these changes, the divorce rate is climbing, and therefore the number of single-parent families is increasing.

The point is that family values never exist in a vacuum but always grow out of the larger and broader cultural changes and values. Some of these values are healthy, and some can be destructive.

One of our culture's unhealthy values that I mentioned in last week's sermon is our society's emphasis on instant personal self-gratification. Individuals want every desire and appetite met here and now. This is one of the main reasons that there has been an increase in the number of teenage mothers and fathers. Waiting for anything is hardly considered. Our desires, whatever they are, deserve to be satisfied as quickly as possible, and the emphasis is on "me" items rather than "we" items.

It's a difficult problem because unless children, as they are growing up, learn to tolerate delay, they will have a difficult time throughout their lives coping with frustration. The world is not so made that we can always have everything when we want it. Furthermore, there is a certain joy that can be experienced only in delaying gratification. We can all remember that, in growing up, there was as much pleasure in the anticipation of waiting for Christmas as there was in Christmas itself. Hopefully, that is still the case, not only for Christmas but for many other things in life as well.

Now let's examine some additional timeless healthy values that our Christian faith offers for strengthening the family. Today we are going to look at these values through the lens and the metaphor of motherhood.

I don't know about you, but because of my own experience with my mother, whenever I think of the word "mother," the image that immediately comes to mind is that of a loving, caring person — a woman who lived and practiced unconditional love. As I read the stories of Jesus and his life, that's what he lived and taught — unconditional love, which includes caring and compassion. I believe Jesus himself experienced this kind of relationship with his mother, Mary.

Unfortunately, the New Testament of the Bible doesn't tell us very much about Mary. She is not physically described, and we don't know anything about the family in which she grew up. Did she have sisters and brothers? We don't know. How old was she when she gave birth to Jesus? We don't know.

The Apostle Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, doesn't even mention her name. He refers to her only indirectly. But there are lots of traditions about Mary that grew up alongside the New Testament. Most of them see her as a devout young peasant woman. According to these traditions, her mother's name was Ann. Still another tradition holds that her husband, Joseph, died many years before she did and that she had to raise the family of at least six children as a single parent.

There are, however, several stories in the New Testament that give us some information about the relationship between Jesus and his mother, Mary. One of these stories is especially helpful to us in understanding how motherhood can be one of the most appropriate metaphors for understanding how to strengthen the family and how to do the will of God.

One day, the mother and brothers of Jesus came to where he was teaching and sent a message through the crowd that they wanted to speak with him. We are not told what was on their minds. Whatever it was, Jesus took the request and made it into a teaching opportunity. He said, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" Then, stretching out his arms toward the disciples and the crowds, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus was saying that if one is going to be a mother in the right sense of that word, that means being a caring, loving person; and more than that, we are all to practice the kind of caring we see in mothers for their children — the kind of caring and love that all good mothers practice.

We are to be loving, caring people regardless of whether or not we are biological mothers. To do the will of God is to be a loving, compassionate person.

To be more specific, this means that no matter who or where we are, we do not escape the responsibility of exhibiting a mother's love, even though we have no children of our own, or because we happen to be male, or because our children have grown up and left home. If the families in our society are to be strengthened and healthy, then all of us in the church need to fill the role of a loving, caring mother.

So too for the church. There's a strange contradiction in the language of Christians. The church is frequently called the "body of Christ," and at the same time, it is often spoken of in feminine terms — feminine pronouns are used. The first verse of the hymn "The Church's One Foundation" begins, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ HER Lord. SHE is the new creation...."

Because the church can be described in feminine terms, I believe we can take one step further and speak of the church as a mother. It's a fitting metaphor.

At one point in his ministry, Jesus used the metaphor of birth, which results from pregnancy, as a way of describing what it is to become a follower of his way. He told an individual that he must "be born anew." As a mother helps bring new life, so the church is to bring new life to people.

Listen to this passage from Isaiah in the Old Testament: "Hearken to me, O house of Jacob, all the remnant of the house of Israel, who have been borne by me from your birth, carried from the womb. Even to your old age, I shall still be the same, and to gray hairs, I will carry you. I have made, and I will bear; I will carry and will save."

How intimate is the relationship between God and us. And how clear that since God carries us as the pregnant mother carries a child, we rest in God. As a mother carries a child, so God carries us.

So also the church is to be like a mother — a creative, life-giving, nurturing, caring institution. I believe in our time the church has to reach out especially to divorced people and single parents. We need to become that extended family that is so often missing. I was especially impressed in visiting one large church a few years ago because that congregation had preferred parking for single parents.

Every time we have a baptism in one of our worship services, we, the members of the congregation, acknowledge that we, along with the parents, are responsible for this child and for all children as they enter into this community of faith. "We promise that we will uphold these parents in the fulfillment of their vows and provide for all children full opportunities for Christian growth and nurture."

Being a mother is more than being pregnant and helping to bring new life into the world; it is to be a caring, nurturing person. And it is also to nurture children and young people so that they become responsible, caring individuals on their own.

So too, the church is to do more than only help people to be born anew, but also to help us grow and mature as Christians and responsible citizens, so that we too become caring, nurturing people.

To be a biological mother involves pregnancy and giving birth, but we are all to be mothers in the way in which we love, care for, and nurture others. The church is to be a mother, and we are to be mothers to each other.

So on this day, when we honor mothers, we salute the mothers among us — our birth mothers, our adoptive mothers, our stepmothers, our grandmothers, our great-grandmothers, and those countless other people who have been a mother to us, be they neighbors, strangers, or relatives. And we also salute the church as our mother, as this body which carries us and gives us new birth and helps us grow and mature. Amen.