# The Family and Marriage

# Ephesians 3, John 19

# A Sermon preached at Pulaski Heights UMC, Little Rock on March 2, 2019 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

A lot has been said in the last few days about same-sex relationships. But most of these discussions assume that we know what the family and marriage are. I’m not so sure we do know what the family and marriage are. So today rather than go over familiar ground about same-sex relationships I want to revisit the territory we perhaps thought we knew. I’m going to start with the family.

Of all the things to say about the family, only three, by my reckoning, are uncontroversial: the family is a good thing, is basic to human existence, and is, in some largely undefined way, under threat. I’d like to explore what the family shows us about society, about the church, and about God.

Let’s start with society. The institution of family that so many lament in decline was largely invented in the nineteenth century. Prior to 200 years ago, marriage was learning to love the person you lived with. In the last 200 years, marriage has been learning to live with the person you once decided you loved. For most of human history, the household was an economic unit. Most industries were cottage industries, and the primary purpose of the home was as a centre of production – reproduction, certainly, but the production of goods for consumption and sale, almost universally. Spouses, children, grandparents and servants all lived and worked together and there weren’t a lot of doors you could close to have space or time to yourself. The reason for having children was to provide more hands to assist in production and to offer care for parents who passed into post-productive old age. Desire, intimacy, tenderness and love were secondary to the primary aim of economic sustainability.

But the industrial revolution changed that radically. It created the breadwinner, who left the home each day to go and do arduous and often soul-destroying work in a factory. It created the distinction between the public realm of labour and the private realm of leisure. It invented the notion of the child, as a person too young to enter the public world of work, and thus restricted to the innocent sphere of the home. It created the role of housewife, as one whose duties were primarily concerned with household management, the rearing of children, and the giving of succour to her weary and heavy-laden husband. It created the nuclear family, because anyone outside these three defined roles of breadwinner, housewife, and child had no place in the new configuration of the home. More subtly it invented the notion of religion as a private, intimate, personal, predominantly female phenomenon, most at home in the household, by contrast with the largely male, non-religious, business-like outside world. (By the way, when politicians say the church shouldn’t comment on public affairs they’re assuming this domesticated religion with its household gods.) It’s this relatively recent invention, the industrial household, rather than the family itself, that’s under threat, because it no longer reflects the social and economic reality of a critical mass of the population. We’re entering a post-industrial era, and the shape of the post-industrial family has not yet fully emerged.

There’s no reason to be sentimental about the industrial family. It flourished because it met the economic realities and provided everyone with clear roles. But it didn’t work for everybody. When you add up the single, the gay, the child at the mercy of parental demands, anger, or worse, the suffocated or oppressed housewife, the breadwinner who faced unemployment or career failure, and the infantilised teenager with the body of an adult but the social standing of a child, you’re probably looking at a majority of the population. In the last generation, with the changing economic role of women, longer life expectancy, diversifying employment patterns, and looser social taboos around sexual expression and divorce, the always-present anomalies and flaws in the nuclear model have become ever more evident.

Before we leave the industrial family behind, let’s pause to recognise what was good about it. It doesn’t take an anthropologist to see how the family comes about. It’s pretty much all in the traditional marriage service, which refers to the controlling of natural lusts, the creation of a sphere of companionship, and the nurturing of a safe space to bring up children. Without the family the boundary-less lusts would result in endless conflict and instability, the isolated individual might be lonely and vulnerable, and the child would be deprived and defenceless. When it works well, the nuclear family can indeed be a refuge from a challenging, frightening, and sometimes damaging world. It can indeed be a place of learning and growth in manners and morals, in creativity and wonder, in faith and courage. It can indeed be solid emotional ground where the priceless qualities of trust, confidence, self-acceptance, tolerance and forgiveness can develop and deepen.

The nuclear family isn’t something one can idly discount. It’s the scene, for most, of our deepest feelings; it’s the context, for many, of the greatest damage; it’s the garden, for most, of our profoundest love; it’s the source, perhaps more than any other environment, of countless analogies; it’s the reason, in the face of loss or betrayal, for our most anguished sadness. I have a cartoon of a therapist’s office, with a man in a foetal position having somehow climbed up to and perched in the topmost corner of the room. The caption has the therapist saying, ‘So, Mr Jones… shall we start with your mother?’ That cartoon says everything that’s inescapable about the family.

Once one has set in place these ground rules about the family – that that’s it’s more or less basic to human existence, that it’s a place of profound longing and need and nurture and joy, yet can also be the context of deep hurt and intolerable constraint, and that it’s had a number of historical forms among which the industrial model is widespread but not definitive – then it’s easier to understand the witness of scripture about the family.

And a sometimes confusing witness it is. The Old Testament affirms that family is basic, but is unsentimental about its flaws. Genesis is a litany of sibling rivalry from Cain and Abel to Jacob and Esau to Joseph and his brothers. The story of Abraham and Isaac hardly paints a rosy picture of household as refuge from the cruel world. Prominent men like Solomon have many wives, and resourceful women like Esther and Bathsheba have to live by their wits to survive. At least the Song of Songs suggests some people were having a good time.

The New Testament is confusing in a different way. Jesus makes few statements about marriage, taking for granted the social code where the command to honour your father and mother is basic, discouraging casual divorce, and yet denying there is marriage in heaven. But his itinerant lifestyle, his singleness, and his radical reinterpretation of family relationships are, to say the least, a transformation of conventional models. For Paul, singleness is the normal state for disciples, and marriage is a particular vocation for particular circumstances. You can’t really call the New Testament family-friendly. The very first time Mary appears in the oldest gospel, Mark, the disciples say, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.’ And Jesus replies, ‘Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’ Elsewhere he says, ‘Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple.’ And at the foot of the cross, the central moment in history, Jesus both affirms and transforms the family. ‘Woman, here is your son,’ says Jesus to Mary. And to the beloved disciple he says, ‘Here is your mother.’

Now there are many interpretations of this scene. One of the most helpful is that Mary represents Israel and the beloved disciple represents the church, and here, at the foot of the cross, Jesus is saying Israel belongs within the wider purpose of God known as the church. But on a personal level, Jesus is recognising that the conventional family cannot always provide all the security, stability, and endurance we each need, and in the face of tragedy, something beautiful can emerge that turns the love of these two people for Jesus into a new kind of love and care for one another.

And this points us to what family means for Christians. It’s never going to be heaven. It’s never going to be a constant ecstasy of love, a seamless robe of happiness, a dreamland of intimate and harmonious relationships, bounding from touching kindness to profound grace to constant affection to limitless trust. It’s never going to be church. It’s never going to have the same diversity, the same global reach, or more than glimpses of the same challenge of mission and repentance and witness and encounter. And it’s never going to be God. I fear that many exaltations of the family in Christian circles aren’t a form of discipleship but are a turning of the family into a god. Family becomes idolatry when it becomes an end in itself, a good thing that justifies all kinds of bad things, a form of extended selfishness that simply widens the walls of the self a little but has no goal beyond its own embellishment. Family isn’t a god; it’s not church; it’s not heaven. Sometimes it can be the opposite of all these things. But what it can be, and what it can be equally well without all the industrial characteristics that have long been thought indispensable, is a training and an avenue into all these things.

Family can teach us about the nature of God as Trinity. Every time a couple have a first child, they are rightly anxious about how the dynamics of each of them with the child will alter the existing dynamics of each of them together. They’re right. It will. It doesn’t necessarily make the relationship less; often it makes it much more. But it always makes it different. The same is true when a new child comes into an existing family. The older sibling will always wonder if it’s possible to love just as much when there are more people in the game. Likewise the Trinity isn’t a self-sufficient solo, or an exclusive mutually-obsessed duo: it’s three, and yet its love is only enriched, multiplied, and deepened by being three rather than one or two. Envy and jealousy are not endemic to family life; insecurity and rivalry, favouritism and cliquiness are not inevitable, however common. Family isn’t an ossification of perfection, but a constant improvisation on growing and changing identities, needs and relationships. The Trinity is a constant invitation and inspiration to see how several can still be one without eliding diversity or eroding personality.

While the family can indeed help us understand the nature of God, the best thing a family can be is a centre for mission. The idea of perpetual domestic bliss is at best a fantasy and at worst a doomed attempt to turn a home into a stockade against all enemies, most of all hostility, hardship, and death. At best a home is a place from which all parties go out to fulfill the call to be fishers for people, to find Christ in the face of the stranger, to take up their cross and follow Jesus, to love God with all their heart and mind and soul and strength. And at best they each return home with something of what they’ve found, a new believer, an ex-prisoner, a person who is carrying the cross, a person who’s suffused with the love of God, and around the table of fellowship they break bread, meet the crucified and risen Christ, and are renewed in love and service. They live in a triangle of one another, the stranger, and God, and come to understand and relate to each in ever-new and deeper ways. Such life doesn’t require a nuclear family. It doesn’t assume specific gender roles, compliant and submissive children, doting grandparents from afar or even perfect marriages. It may well include configurations of households beyond that imagined by the conventional breakfast cereal commercial. But it does require sharing and tenderness, mutual forbearance and intergenerational grace, forgiveness and reconciliation, time and trust, kindness and companionship, loyalty and love, and an understanding of a common goal far beyond the comfort and indulgence of the individuals involved. And when you have that, you might not yet have a church. But you do have a family.

Let’s now turn to marriage. I want to explore what I’m going to call the three faces of marriage. The first face of marriage is what we could call face-to-face. It’s two people looking at each other, attending to one another, seeing the deep joy and desire and yet fragility and fear in each other’s eyes. It’s two people tracing the beauty of hair and the curious shape of the nose, the softness of skin and the electricity of touch. It’s two people enjoying a whole lot else about each other that we needn’t go into right now.

The second face of marriage takes place at a 90-degree angle from the first. We could call it the side-by-side face of marriage. It’s two people getting on with life together. One person taking the trash out while the other loads the dishwasher. One choosing some music while the other lays the table. One clearing the children’s toys away while the other reads bedtime stories. One filling out the tax return while the other goes on the web and makes travel plans to go see the family over Thanksgiving. When it’s good, it’s because the couple have discovered how to make these mundane tasks a different way of making love. The ordinary is interrupted by moments of touch and tenderness as vital as the waterfall of passion. When it’s bad, of course, and the tenderness a distant memory, each of these necessary but sometimes wearisome tasks gets recorded on a silent roster of resentment.

The third face of marriage happens at a further 90-degree angle from the second. We could call it back-to-back. It’s two people who are married but are doing the other things in life they need to do when they’re not around one another. It’s all the work and effort and relationships and hopes and fears that would almost all be there regardless of the marriage, and yet are made new and different and meaningful because they exist within the matrix of marriage. When all is well this is as much a way of showing and feeling and expressing love as the other two faces: storing up stories to share, forging an identity that the spouse can be proud of, grasping in one’s pocket the memento she gave you last night, quickly calling his cell phone right after he’s due to have had that difficult meeting. But when all is not well there are lingering suspicions that formulate around the seldom-articulated conclusion, ‘Work is where you go to get away from me.’

Here’s the bad news about marriage. I’ve never known a single couple who were perfect in all three of these faces. We have euphemisms for the ways people discover their frailties. One is ‘They had a passionate marriage.’ I suspect this means they were pretty intense about number one, face-to-face, but they never quite worked out how to translate that passionate love into numbers two and three, side-by-side and back-to-back. You can picture the scene: she’s in Chicago all weekend on a conference and calls home to him. Some minutes into the call she can tell from the background noise he’s reading his email while he’s on the phone to her. In other words he’s flipped unthinkingly from number one to number three. She’s apoplectic with rage. When she comes home they have no reservoir of side-by-side things to do together to get used to each other again, like cooking a meal or walking the dog. So they try plunging into the intensity of face-to-face. Sometimes it works and the resentment is borne away from the hidden storehouse of anger by the torrent of desire. But oh, when it doesn’t work, oh how the crockery flies and the voices rise in fury. ‘They had a passionate marriage’ indeed.

Another euphemism is ‘They’re such a great couple.’ To me this means they’ve got number two right: they seem to interact seamlessly around the home and amid one another’s friendships, so one always feels welcome in their presence but never questions they have a deeper bond with each other that creates the music for the lesser dances they can animate and enjoy with everyone else. They’ve learnt how to be good companions and form a lifelong friendship. But marriage isn’t the same as friendship. I wonder how often ‘They’re such a great couple’ is a euphemism for saying number one, the face-to-face, has literally gone to sleep. Side-by-side is great when there’s a lot to do, when children are demanding and patience and understanding are in high demand. But what about when such a couple dreads going on holiday together, dreads Valentine’s Day, wants a dozen other people to join them on their wedding anniversary because they’ve lost the art of looking into each other’s eyes in such a way that nothing else matters? ‘They’re such a great couple’ indeed.

And a third euphemism is ‘They had an old-fashioned marriage.’ An old-fashioned marriage it seems to me is a way of saying we keep numbers two and three – the side-by-side and the back-to-back – very separate. We concentrate on getting the back-to-back right, because it puts a roof over our heads and supper on the table. We rejoice in big family occasions when all the back-to-back endeavour is justified by a public show of ideal side-by-sideness, recorded on grand photographs, appropriately of smiling people side-by-side. In a really old-fashioned marriage of course the side-by-side activity is entirely done by the woman and the back-to-back labour is all done by the man. But to me an old-fashioned marriage is a euphemism for one in which the number three, back-to-back existence, of the couple is allowed to drift off into a sphere so separate from the rest of the relationship, and often in practice so much more important than the rest of the relationship, that the couple are only really married for part of the time.

That’s the bad news about marriage.

Here’s the good news about marriage. It’s not supposed to be perfect. It’s supposed to be good. If you’re expecting the face-to-face and side-by-side and back-to-back to exist at a perpetual ecstasy of perfection all the time you’ll be making the perfect the enemy of the good. To quote that ancient doctor of the church Meat Loaf, two out of three ain’t bad. So for example at the outset of marriage it would make perfect sense if the face-to-face was pretty absorbing, because added to tenderness and beauty is the elixir of novelty. And it would make perfect sense if the back-to-back was going fine, because the couple have had separate lives for many years, and they know pretty much how to run their life when they’re not together. But it also makes perfect sense if the fireworks come in the side-by-side, when one moves into another’s home and does things differently, when friends whom they used to see separately now only have the one house to meet in, when close relatives who used to receive their regular phone call during times the two of them were apart now discover there aren’t any leisure times when they can get one of the couple all to themselves. So the good of marriage is allowing the joy of front and back to carry you through for a time while you sort out the delicate matter of sideways.

Later a couple may find that the long-practised habits and gentlenesses of side-by-side are disrupted by the voracious demands of small children, such that the back-to-back feels like a relief from the relentless intensity of home and the face-to-face feels like a luxury item for special occasions only. Then a couple may need to take active steps to ensure that the joy of life doesn’t disappear in the haze and they may need to do whatever it takes to remind one another that face-to-face is not a luxury item but a glorious human necessity. ‘My delight is in you.’ Is that a sentence any of us could ever go very long without needing to hear?

Perhaps at any time the back-to-back may threaten the best of marriages. Your absorption in work or the friendships you make away from home can threaten the other faces of marriage at any time. But then you need to remember that side-by-side, making a home and a life together, is work too, good and important work, and whatever joy you may find in work is only part of the joy marriage is meant to be for you. So the good news of marriage is that at different times any two faces of marriage can make up for and redeem and restore a third face if that face has for some reason turned blank or gone sour.

And the theological news of marriage is that the three faces of marriage correspond to three ways we interact with God. We see God face-to-face, and for a time we may think that’s the whole of faith, to have that sense of peace and love and joy in the presence of God. But we also walk side-by-side with God, happy to be sharing in the companionship of the kingdom, alongside others whom God has called into witness and discipleship and service. And we also live back-to-back with God, when for short or long periods we can’t feel or know God is there, and yet we know it is God alone that makes our heart sing and we have committed ourselves to be among God’s children and we know the feeling will come back again because it always has before. The most significant and exasperating thing about marriage is that it’s the best analogy for what it means to be face-to-face and side-by-side and back-to-back with God.

For Christians this walk of faith is made incarnate in the central figure of Jesus, fully human and fully divine. Jesus’ full humanity is a perpetual warning against what theologians call Gnosticism and everyone else calls sentimentality. Let me explain. When it comes to loving God, we’d all like to be overcome by a powerful feeling of wind and fire that blew us away and made God more real to us than anything else. When it comes to marriage we’d all like to be overwhelmed by a passionate desire that not only flung us into perpetual ecstasy but also miraculously got the tumble dryer fixed and paid the bills each week. But infuriatingly God hasn’t made faith or marriage like that. In the incarnation of Jesus God says to us, ‘I’m not sending you a shortcut. The gift of faith and the gift of marriage are not about a dazzling escape from life, but about the heart of life. You will only receive them if you learn the shape of the way I have given myself to you in Jesus. You will only meet my divinity if you see and embrace and imitate my full humanity.’

This is the gift and the challenge of faith and the gift and the challenge of marriage. You will only meet God and you will only truly meet one another if you do so through recognising, attending to, and offering your full humanity. Show and tell each other your deepest needs, your deepest fears, your deepest failures; and then your deepest hopes, dreams and desires will seem not threats but gifts. Don’t feel your face-to-face time must be all sweet nothings, but lovingly share with one another those things you don’t understand and struggle to love. Make the most of car journeys, for those are the times when side-by-side you can share what face-to-face seems too great to name. And never despair that the worst back-to-back aberration can’t be redeemed by restorative attention side-by-side and face-to-face.

This is the way God turns water into wine. This is the way God puts treasure in clay jars. These are the three faces of marriage. And our prayer for the married is that God will bless them through these three faces of marriage, and each will bring them closer to one another and closer to God. For we do meet God; but only through our own humanity, and only through God’s.

What I believe we’ve discovered through this exploration of the family and marriage is that they’re not disembodied ideals whose form and nature has been revealed and decreed for all time, nor are they absolute states that are the epicentre of God’s purposes. Instead they are social and interpersonal states that have changed over the centuries, and changed rapidly in recent decades. The way we express our faithfulness to God is not to preserve or suppose some idealised state commanded and demanded, but by humbly discovering in what social arrangements we best embody the nature of God and God’s call to offer good news. And that call, like God’s faithfulness, is new every morning.