



ALL SAINTS CHURCH

PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

Reflections On The Contemporary Home

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. George F. Regas

Rector Emeritus

May 10, 2009

As some of you may remember in those years long past when I was the Rector of All Saints, Mother's Day was always difficult for me as a preacher. I always tried to address the topic of Mother's Day but it was a huge challenge to do it creatively.

I grew up in a culture in the South where on Mother's Day, children whose mother was living wore red roses and those children whose mothers had died wore white roses. What a destructive ritual! Since my mother had died when I was very young and my father had never remarried – Mother's Day was always filled with the greatest sadness.

Four decades ago here at All Saints I began preaching about mothers on this special day and tried to give them the highest respect and honor which they deserved. We gave a red rose to every Mom and applauded the oldest mother among us.

That didn't last long. Those who were not mothers felt left out and families that had several mothers got confused and there were always a few fathers who interpreted this as neglect. It was hard to win.

Sometimes on Mother's Day I addressed the topic of marriage. With one third of the population today being single, this was not always the most helpful way to treat the day. The idea that every woman is waiting for the right man to come along certainly would not win unanimous applause. Remember that T-shirt popular a few years ago that said, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle!"

So here we are today, such a diverse gathering, worshipping at All Saints on Mother's Day; what a motley crew you are.

Some treasure your mothers; others have been in deep conflict with your mothers all your life; some have never known a mother.

There are many who are single and delight in that status and others who long passionately for a partner.

Some of you are married, with children and grandchildren.

Others are divorced; some divorced and remarried – a few several times. There are stepchildren in many homes.

There are many same sex couples here and a number of our gay and lesbian couples have children.

Some families have two fathers and others have two mothers.

These are the configurations of our families.
It is to this complex, diverse, beautiful, wonderful community that I preach this Mother's Day. I'm delighted to engage the challenge.

Here is one of my favorite stories I got years ago from my friend, Bill Coffin who was at Riverside Church in New York.

Two old codgers went hunting moose in the forest surrounding Moosehead Lake in the northeastern part of Maine. As the pilot of the seaplane let them off on the lakeshore, he reminded them: "Like I said, I'll be back in three days. But remember it is a tiny plane. There is room for two of you and one small moose."

Three days later when the pilot returned and taxied to shore, he was irritated to see between the two old boys not one but two moose - - and huge ones at that. "Look," he said, "I told you, the two of you and one moose."

The old timers looked at each other in surprise and answered, "That's funny. The pilot last year didn't complain."

The fear of his competition proved greater than all other fears - - so the pilot relented. Grumbling, he helped put both moose into the little plane, and the two old timers lay on top of them.

The plane took forever to get off the lake, barely clearing the trees on the far shore. About a quarter of a mile farther on, it clipped a high pine tree and crashed, sending pieces of wings and moose antlers in all directions. Finally, one of the old codgers came to, pulled his head out of the wreckage, spied his companion a short ways off, and asked, "Where are we?" His friend replied, "Oh, about 100 yards farther than last year."

The contemporary home is vastly different from the one I grew up in 78 years ago in Tennessee. Families are changing radically and God's grace still permeates those changes; and new alignments are certain to emerge over the next decade.

Yes, we still have our crashes, but we have made significant progress toward a land of authentic hope, integrity and health

As we make our way in a new land, I want to offer some reflections.

I

Let's look at marriage, divorce and remarriage.

There is little doubt among biblical scholars that the mind of Christ on marriage is that husband and wife have a life long union

The ultimate intention of Jesus for marriage is that nothing, nothing will ever sever the covenant of love that binds a couple together. Even as we admit our failures to meet this vision, we must not compromise it.

I share with you that I failed in my first marriage to Jane 36 years ago. I have been married to Mary for 32 years and hope to live to 96 so we can celebrate our golden anniversary.

Many of you have gone through divorce. Although the divorce statistics are inching downward, they still say close to 50% of marriages end in divorce – and for second marriages with stepchildren it is 70%. Divorce is built into the fabric of American society. But underneath those harsh statistics are tears, broken hearts and scarred psyches.

If there are carefree, guilt free, scar free divorces, I don't know about them. Many divorced people limp through life – but some limp toward the sunrise.

With those ideals of Jesus for a life long union of married love before us, I still acknowledge that sometimes divorce is the only way.

- Sometimes, for a thousand foolish reasons, a relationship becomes so broken and a couple so estranged that they are simply unable to retrieve and rebuild it. Their relationship is a hollow shell.
- Sometimes two people are just too immature and have no skills to work through the complexities of married life, and so they bruise each other as they live in the shadows and scream to get out.
- Sometimes one partner is drawn into a sexual liaison outside of marriage and lets go of the commitment of fidelity in order to satisfy those aching, passionate longings for another
- Sometimes one partner is confused about his or her sexuality, and in coming to terms with who he or she is, they must leave the marriage
- Sometimes a woman refuses to be abused any longer – her life, her body, her dignity too sacred to allow her to be abused, threatened, humiliated.
- Sometimes in the midst of emptiness, confusion and alienation, one partner seeks counseling while the other is adamant in a position of moral superiority.
- Sometimes for some mysterious reason a couple finds themselves in a place of such radical incompatibility of values that life itself is drained out of the relationship.

Oh, the tragedy of that! The disintegration of the marriage started long before the decision for divorce is made. Divorce is only the legal recognition that a relationship has died or that one partner is no longer willing to struggle on to rebuild it.

Add to this tragedy all the children. We have pretended in our permissive society that whatever adults want to do with their lives will benefit the children. Don't believe it. Few would say that a couple should stay together if those parents are at dagger points and destroying each other. But the most recent research reveals the devastating consequences that divorce has on children.

Over the last 40 years, the rights, privileges and well being of the individual have gained greater importance than the maintenance of traditional marriage. That is a tremendous change. Prior to this radical shift, the institution had priority over the individual. For the sake

of marriage the individual was expected to sacrifice everything. Clearly, that is no longer the case and this is a radical change.

Its implications permeate all of society. God did not create human being for marriage; rather God created marriage for human benefit. So many churches have gradually come to understand the unacceptability of forcing people to suffer in a marital arrangement that had originally been designed for their happiness and well being. Once individual needs are given a place of importance and priority, the institution of marriage sees radical changes.

Over the past decades individuals have enlarged the range of significant demands placed upon marriage and the home:

- personal dignity and full careers for women,
- equality of power between the sexes,
- shared responsibility for child rearing,
as well as shared responsibilities for economic health,
- sexual fulfillment,
- intimacy and deep friendship,
- integrity of same sex families and homes.

These demands and radical changes have shaken to the core the foundations of traditional marriages and homes. It is no puzzle that there are so many divorces.

In many ways, divorce is a symptom of this radical underlying change. It is a painful symptom, but there it is. Women and men are rejecting the idea that family is more important than one's own physical and emotional well-being.

Violence hidden for centuries is now talked about in public view. The problem called family violence is symptomatic of these underlying changes – changes away from the traditions that made family preeminent over the individual and gave husbands unquestioned authority over their wives – all in the name of family stability.

We have gone from institutional preeminence to individual rights. Don't underestimate how radical this shift really is ... there is health in all of this but there is also conflict and chaos in this change. We have not discerned well how to balance the well being of the institution of the family with the well being of individuals who make it up, to balance fidelity and honor in marriage with the rights of personal growth and fulfillment.

II

In the midst of these radical changes to the institution of marriage and the family, as we try to balance the health of the institution with the well being of the individuals who make it up, I would suggest two ways, among many, to move through the chaos and turbulence to more solid ground.



Let your love and concern for your partner and family include the world.

A relationship is too small if it does not include the world with all its pains and burdens.

A relationship with inverted love builds a home with no windows to the world and that's not a very beautiful place to live. Our vibrant love soon suffocates.

In my experiences as a priest, the happiest relationships, the ones filled with greatest vitality, joy and power belong to those who have chosen to give themselves away, to take upon themselves some of the pain that lies upon the earth and seeks its healing and transformation.

If a family closes its heart and conscience to the blood, tears and anguish that permeate the world and refuses to be agents of life and healing – then that family's power to survive gloriously is greatly diminished.

Deep beauty emerges when a couple, when a family, takes on some of the pain that lies upon the earth and tries to transform and heal it.

Last week in the midst of a marriage celebration with all its grandeur and beauty, I prayed with the couple that God would fill them with such grace that their love for each other not blind them to the brokenness and pain of the world.

David McCullough's great book, John Adams, captured America's heart. I heard McCullough interviewed a few years ago and he was asked how he would describe John and Abigail's relationship. His response was remarkable:

“This was truly a great love story. And they weren't just lovers gazing at each other, but rather lovers gazing out in the same direction – in many ways that's a stronger definition of love.”

Remember our Mother's Day Celebration really began with Julia Ward Howe's Mother's Day Proclamation in 1870.

Having written the words of the “Battle Hymn of the Republic” 12 years earlier, Howe had become distraught by the death and carnage of the Civil War. She called on mothers to come together and protest what she saw as the futility of their sons killing the sons of other mothers. She made an impassioned appeal to womanhood to rise up against war. These words are part of her call in 1870 for an international day celebrating peace and motherhood:

“Arise, then women of this day!
Arise all women who have hearts,
Whether your baptism be of water or of tears
Say firmly:
We women of one country
Will be too tender of those of another country

To allow our sons to be trained to injure theirs.
Our sons shall not be taken from us to unlearn
All that we have been able to teach them of
Charity, mercy and patience.”

Anna Jarvis and her daughter were influenced by Howe and pushed for a national Mother’s Day celebration. President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed in 1914 for the second Sunday in May each year as national holiday in honor of mothers.

I think the spirit of God is saying to us today – go back to Julia Ward Howe and Anna Jarvis who saw Mother’s Day as an impassioned plea for peace, as we also acknowledge the futility of our sons killing the sons of other mothers.

I urge us, all of us, mothers and fathers, and children of mothers, to say to President Obama, as clearly as we possibly can, that we oppose Afghanistan becoming his Iraq; that we oppose 60,000 troops in Afghanistan and \$2.5 billion a month for this new U.S. occupation.

Mr. President, we call you back to your dream of a world without the slaughter of war, a world where our precious financial resources are used for health, education and the well being of our own children and the children of the world. Say to the Muslim world in all its complexity – “we are your friends.”

Mr. President, sending more Americans to kill and die in the quagmire of Afghanistan is a tragic mistake. We call you to great leadership as a peacemaker – that would make glad the hearts of God and the hearts of mothers.



As we move through the turbulence and confusion in families, I suggest a second way to solid ground: Let God’s power sustain your relationship.

These are trying times. It is a challenging task to sustain a commitment of love. Today’s culture does not give support to lifelong love and sexual fidelity. We swim against the stream, against a fierce current.

It is my belief that if any of us are to make it through the years gloriously, we need to depend on a greater power than our own.

There is a famous moment in the Jewish Bible when God sent an angel to the prophet Elijah, who was worn out and discouraged. The angel said to him, “Elijah, arise and eat, or else your journey will be too great for you.” (I Kings 19: 4-10)

Most of the blessings of marriage at All Saints are combined with the Eucharist. I love that. The first act of husband and wife, the first act of gay couples, is to eat at the Lord’s table and there find the grace to faithfully love one another forever. They rely on God’s power for the great adventure of a close, faithful, loving relationship.

The Angel's words to Elijah, arise and eat or else the journey will be too great for you, speak to us today: Seek God's strength, wisdom and nourishment for the soul, or else the journey through these radically changing times will be too great for you.

Howard Thurman, the great preacher and author of a generation ago, once said the most impressive experience of his life was watching the play, "The Fool." In one scene a woman confined to a wheelchair sees her lover brutally beaten and knocked to the ground by some men who think he had betrayed them.

As he falls to the ground bleeding, the crippled woman, who had never walked, gets out of the wheelchair, walks across the stage and kneels to help the man she loves.

The leader of the gang cries out, "Look, she walks! God is in this room!"

Again and again I've seen miracles in human relationships. I've seen God in the room because people found the grace, the divine strength, not to give up. I've seen God in the room when people found the grace to forgive the deepest hurts and draw each other close again as though the offense had never been committed. I've seen God in the room when people knew God was a God of the future, and buried their past, grasped hands and limped toward the sunrise.

III

As I close, I speak to those struggling to keep a relationship together. Don't quit too soon, not before you've committed all the energies of your life and the wise counsel of therapists to the possibilities of new life, health and beauty in your relationship. Claim God's power. Victory can be yours.

I also speak to those who have failed in marriage or in a most sacred and precious relationship. God's grace is in that failure. God's mercy is there to forgive and redeem our defeats and offer us a new future where we become all God created us to be.

So Happy Mother's Day.

Amen.