

The Decline of the American Family, or a Return to Family as it Should Be?

Rise & Shine, March 8th

Mark 3:31-35

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

1 Timothy 5:1-2, 8

Do not speak harshly to an older man, but speak to him as to a father, to younger men as brothers, to older women as mothers, to younger women as sisters—with absolute purity. ... And whoever does not provide for relatives, and especially for family members, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.

Questions:

1. How has the shape of your family changed over the years? How has your faith helped you cope with those changes?
 2. How can the church help strengthen nuclear families? How can the church help to strengthen the ties between extended family members? How can the church better serve as a forged family?
 3. Have you ever felt treated as a respected and beloved family member by those with whom you share no relation?
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In the News

Columnist Calls for Reclamation of Extended Family Model to Strengthen Ties That Bind Us Together

In "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake," published in the March edition of *The Atlantic*, columnist David Brooks details multiple challenges facing the family in America. He lays out a compelling case for the idea that the popular "ideal" self-sufficient and autonomous nuclear family model of the 1950s (two parents with 2.5 children) was a myth, a hiccup, an aberration in the

thousands of years of human history when the extended family was the normative way people organized their relationships.

Today, only one-third of American individuals live in a nuclear family. The rest reside in single parent or person households, blended families, grandparent-headed families, with never-married parents, or other types of households.

For many reasons, as Americans sought greater freedom, "convenience, privacy and mobility" for individuals, extended and nuclear families have become more unstable and fragmented. The relative strength or weakness of any given family is impacted by many factors, including access or lack thereof to education, wealth, resources, safe and sustainable housing, childcare, employment, community support, government policies, race, health services, involvement in the criminal justice system, gender, immigration status, etc.

Once upon a time, when three of every four Americans worked on farms, and most of the rest worked in small family businesses, survival depended on having large multigenerational families built around family businesses. Personal liberties were secondary to preserving the family unit.

Members of an interwoven extended family had more resources for support and to absorb shocks in times of trouble than did members of smaller family units. As America moved away from an agriculture-based economy into the industrial revolution, children were increasingly less likely to play an economic role in the family and "were raised not for embeddedness but for autonomy," Brooks writes. Multigenerational cohabitation declined, as nuclear families splintered away from the extended family model.

Over time, cultural trends such as the women's movement, rise in divorce rates, and decline in the American marriage and birth rate and size of families, further changed the shape of families. Sociologists Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas say that people increasingly married, not so much to have and raise children, but to attain "adult fulfillment." Family values of self-sacrifice and cooperation with others began to take a back seat to prioritization of individualistic, self-oriented goals.

Brooks writes, "People who grow up in a nuclear family tend to have a more individualistic mindset than people who grow up in a multigenerational extended clan. People with an individualistic mindset tend to be less willing to

sacrifice self for the sake of the family, and the result is more family disruption."

We are of two minds: nostalgic for the past, yet unwilling and unable to trade our personal preferences for the sake of a messier communal life. "Our culture is oddly stuck," Brooks writes. "We want stability and rootedness, but also mobility, dynamic capitalism, and the liberty to adopt the lifestyle we choose. We want close families, but ... we can't quite return to a more collective world." Recent economic pressures such as high student debt, lack of affordable housing, childcare, or a job that pays a living wage, or failing health can push independent-minded Americans to reconsider how much distance they want between themselves and their relatives. Since the financial crisis of 2008, there has been a steep rise in multigenerational homes.

More people are looking for opportunities to live with people who are not necessarily biological relatives. These connections create what may be called "chosen" or "forged" families, according to political scientist Daniel Burns. In the nine-unit complex, Temescal Commons, in Oakland, California, for example, 23 residents, ranging in age from 1 to 83, share common eating and recreation areas as well as maintenance responsibilities, and help each other out with childcare, mentoring, financial stresses, health emergencies, and everyday needs and concerns. Courtney E. Martin, one of the residents, values the experience because it offers children "different versions of adulthood" as role models. "We consider all of our kids all of our kids," she said.

There are many other examples of co-housing projects. While some are more general, offering housing for those who want a social support network, others are geared specifically toward single mothers, young singles, young parents, ex-convicts, veterans, etc... "The members of your chosen family are the people who will show up for you no matter what," Brooks declares. "The ones who accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile and who love you no matter what.

"Americans are hungering to live in extended and forged families, in ways that are new and ancient at the same time," Brooks concludes. "This is a significant opportunity, a chance to thicken and broaden family relationships, a chance to allow more adults and children to live and grow under the loving gaze of a dozen pairs of eyes, and be caught, when they fall, by a dozen pairs of arms.

For decades we have been eating at smaller and smaller tables, with fewer and fewer kin. It's time to find ways to bring back the big tables."

Genesis 12:1-5

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan.

Ruth 2:11-12

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your But Boaz answered [Ruth], "All that you have done for your mother-in-law since the death of your husband has been fully told me, and how you left your father and mother and your native land and came to a people that you did not know before. May the LORD reward you for your deeds, and may you have a full reward from the LORD, the God of Israel, under whose wings you have come for refuge!"

Prayer for Families (BCP p.828)

Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who sets the solitary in families: We commend to your continual care the homes in which your people dwell. Put far from them, we ask you, every root of bitterness, the desire of vainglory, and the pride of life. Fill them with faith, virtue, knowledge, temperance, patience, godliness. Knit together in constant affection those who, in holy wedlock, have been made one flesh. Turn the hearts of the parents to the children, and the hearts of the children to the parents; and so enkindle fervent charity among us all, that we may evermore be kindly affectioned one to another; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen