

WHAT ARE FAMILY VALUES?

Later the following events took place: Naboth the Jezreelite had a vineyard in Jezreel, beside the palace of King Ahab of Samaria. And Ahab said to Naboth, "Give me your vineyard, so that I may have it for a vegetable garden, because it is near my house; I will give you a better vineyard for it; or, if it seems good to you, I will give you its value in money." But Naboth said to Ahab, "The LORD forbid that I should give you my ancestral inheritance." Ahab went home resentful and sullen because of what Naboth the Jezreelite had said to him; for he had said, "I will not give you my ancestral inheritance." He lay down on his bed, turned away his face, and would not eat.

His wife Jezebel came to him and said, "Why are you so depressed that you will not eat?" He said to her, "Because I spoke to Naboth the Jezreelite and said to him, 'Give me your vineyard for money; or else, if you prefer, I will give you another vineyard for it'; but he answered, 'I will not give you my vineyard.'" His wife Jezebel said to him, "Do you now govern Israel? Get up, eat some food, and be cheerful; I will give you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite." So she wrote letters in Ahab's name and sealed them with his seal; she sent the letters to the elders and the nobles who lived with Naboth in his city. She wrote in the letters, "Proclaim a fast, and seat Naboth at the head of the assembly; seat two scoundrels opposite him, and have them bring a charge against him, saying, 'You have cursed God and the king.' Then take him out, and stone him to death."

As soon as Jezebel heard that Naboth had been stoned and was dead, Jezebel said to Ahab, "Go, take possession of the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, which he refused to give you for money; for Naboth is not alive, but dead." As soon as Ahab heard that Naboth was dead, Ahab set out to go down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite, to take possession of it.

Then the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying: Go down to meet King Ahab of Israel, who rules in Samaria; he is now in the vineyard of Naboth, where he has gone to take possession. You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: Have you killed, and also taken possession?" You shall say to him, "Thus says the LORD: In the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs will also lick up your blood." Ahab said to Elijah, "Have you found me, O my enemy?" He answered, "I have found you. Because you have sold yourself to do what is evil in the sight of the LORD, I will bring disaster on you

1 Kings 21:1-10, 15-21 NRSV

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all." Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me."

Mark 9:33-37 NRSV

A good friend of mine whom I went to seminary with has found himself in a family arrangement that is becoming if not common in our culture at least less unusual. He is a stay-at-home dad. I went to seminary with Link and he is capable of pursuing any career he might choose in the professional world, but he and his wife Karen have decided that it is best for their family for him not to work outside the home while she pursues her

career as a doctor. Together they are raising two terrific boys. Although the role of a stay-at-home dad is becoming more common, it is not so common that people still don't express a little surprise that Link, as the man and father in the family, is not out pursuing a professional career. There still exists the unspoken assumption that if one parent will remain home to take primary responsibility for the kids, it will most likely be the mother who does so.

Link and Karen are educated and liberated people. Link especially is the kind of person who would fight for the right of any person—male or female—to follow their own heart's desire or sense of calling in spite of society's gendered expectations. Yet, I sense some frustration on Link's part at times when he wonders why he went to seminary and prepared for a career that he ended up not pursuing. I can't help but think that gender stereotypes play a role, however subtle, in Link's thinking (as I'm sure they would on my own thinking were I in Link's situation). It has been common enough for women to give up their careers to focus on raising children that hardly anyone would blink at the idea of it, but it is still out of the ordinary for a man to do so. I have no doubt that Link would consider raising his sons to be a noble calling, but I also sense some discomfort on his part as he chafes against the expectations culture has placed upon him.

I've thought a lot about Link and his boys lately, especially since last October when I became the father of two boys myself. I've had a lot of my own questions about what does it mean to be a man in our culture today and what kind of identity do I want to help foster in my son's lives? As I struggle with my own issues of whether or not I am making enough time for my sons and whether or not my lack of athleticism is a handicap for my four year-old on the tee ball field, I do have to admit that the cultural landscape is shifting just as it has been shifting for some time in terms of what is expected of men, women and families in our society.

It is that shifting which makes it so appealing to lapse into a kind of nostalgia for yesteryear when supposedly families in America were accurately portrayed in sit-coms like *Father Knows Best* and *Ozzie and Harriet*. The broad expanse of American families were never quite so Caucasian or middle class or peaceful. When we look to the past, we should remember that although some things may have been better back then, the "golden era" of the fifties, let's say, was also a time of rampant racism and sexism when a good portion of our nation was not allowed the most basic of civil rights.

Whatever the reality of our culture over the last sixty years, the dominant narrative for many people today, especially religious people, is one where everything went to hell in a hand basket when men stopped acting like men and women stopped acting like women and everything got confused. Usually, it is said that such a slide towards Sodom and Gomorrah began in the Sixties and has only continued faster since then with only occasional plateaus during the Reagan administration.

According to this way of thinking, the solution to such a cultural devolution is a return to "family values." This is one of those perfectly crafted rhetorical flourishes that can mean pretty much whatever the speaker wants it to mean. It is an evocative image that remains undefined, sort of like "war on terror." Everyone agrees terrorism is bad, but when you dissect this phrase, questions like "who is a terrorist?" and "how far will we go to stop terrorists?" reveal that this phrase is deceptively complex. In a similar way, "family values" sounds like something we all could get behind, but when you press the phrase a bit, questions like "what is a family?" and "whose values are we talking about?" reveal that things are not so simple. The way the phrase has been used in political discourse over the last twenty years or so evokes an affirmation of domesticity and clear roles for parents and children. It evokes a lot of things, very few of which can actually be created through legislation or executive orders.

The best way I know to understand what a word or phrase means is to look at how it is used. From how I have heard the phrase "family values" used, "family values" usually implies something that conservatives have and liberals don't, something that white Protestants have and pretty much everyone else does not, rich people and at least middle class people have them but poor people do not (because if they did they wouldn't be poor), and

somewhere in the mix men lead, women and children follow, and most important of all, they exist only where there is a father and a mother and 2.5 children.

The desire for such a norm is strong, but when you examine what falls outside the boundaries of these “family values” you have a picture of what the people who espouse them are really afraid of. Single parents do not fit into such family values. Neither do other so-called non-traditional families, such as grandparents raising grandchildren. You can forget about “family values” existing in families where the parents are gay or lesbian. Couples that aren’t married can’t have family values, and even divorced people don’t fit in such an understanding of family. “Family values” implies that couples who do not have children are not in reality families. I bet if each of us thought about it, we could think of families that do not fit the norm of the “family values” crowd but that nonetheless demonstrate love for one another and for the world outside of them. That’s the problem with artificially constructed norms for behavior and morality; reality always has a way of poking holes in them.

I have a proposal for answering the question of what exactly are “family values.” What if, instead of reflexively responding with fear and judgment whenever we encountered people whose concept of family was different than our own, we actually tried to understand what it is a particular family values? What do you think: family values as things actually valued by families?”

In our first scripture lesson this morning, we find a story of what biblical scholar Richard Carlson calls “a clash of family values.”¹ It provides us with a case study in how to assess the values of a particular family. In this story, we find greedy King Ahab of Israel who desires a vineyard near one of his palaces owned by a man named Naboth. When Naboth refuses to sell or swap the land, the king goes home and sulks. When his wife, Queen Jezebel, finds out about it, she mocks him and concocts a scheme to frame the innocent landowner and take his land. Naboth dies. Ahab gets the land. God is not happy and sends the prophet Elijah to declare that dogs will lick up the blood of the king and queen, which eventually happens. It’s not a pretty story.

I believe that this story can best be understood in terms of what each family in it values. First, there is Naboth the Jezreelite, so called because he owns the vineyard in the town of Jezreel. His land is an essential part of his identity. When he refuses the king’s offer to buy it, it is not because the offer is unfair but because it is his “ancestral inheritance.” By referring to his land in this way, Naboth reveals that he understands his land as having been given by God to his family in the past and intended for the perpetual livelihood of his family past and present.²

To Naboth this vineyard is a familial reality and an identity marking spanning time. To exploit that for his own short-term advantage would be an act of profaning (of making common) the sacred gift that God gave to his family as its legacy. Hence his family values (which include God, land, the past, and the future) forbid him from selling the land to Ahab.³

In other words, for Naboth, some things are worth more than money.

These types of values seem lost on Ahab. His own royal palace in Samaria was not an ancestral inheritance given by God but merely built by his father.⁴ It is a possession only and when Naboth’s land will not also become his possession, he goes and lies down in bed, turning to the wall and refusing to eat. He pouts. Enter Jezebel.

To be fair, Ahab does not tell his wife that he approached Naboth as an equal or the reasoning for Naboth’s refusal to sell. He presents the scenario as a subject being insubordinate to his king. In any case, where Ahab pouts Jezebel acts. She uses royal power and even manipulates religious tradition to frame Naboth as a traitor and a blasphemer. She is “daughter of one king and spouse to another king” and she understands that subjects cannot stand in the way of the royal family.⁵ She demonstrates that her family values power and control by whatever means necessary.

Both families in this story—Naboth’s family and the royal family—have values, but those values are not shared, hence the tragedy. Jezebel’s (and by going along with the plan, Ahab’s) family values “lead to conduct that is exploitative, deceptive and abusive to others beyond the family. She is not part of a larger community; she manipulates community for family goals...Her horizons extend no further than issues concerning the family’s power and what the family can attain for itself.”⁶

Naboth, on the other hand, exhibits family values that are outward-looking rather than insular. He honors his family’s past and acts to secure its healthy continuation. He recognizes that his family is a part of a larger community and that community includes God. “Ultimately, he sees God as the giver and sustainer of healthy, ongoing family functioning. Consequently, he is intentional in making decisions that not only have family implications but are faithful to God’s perspectives.”⁷

One family thinks only of itself, and its members have no concern for how their actions impact the wider world around them. Everything is reduced to something meant for their own comfort by whatever means or it is irrelevant. The other family sees itself as connected to something greater than the sum of its own parts. That something greater includes geography and land, heritage and future, community and God. Short-term gain for momentary comfort is to be avoided when it means compromising things that are really important.

The question that we as people of faith should be asking is not “do we have family values?” but “what type of values do our families have?” Are we teaching our children to be like the embezzling executives of Enron or like the whistleblower Sherron Watkins who recognized that the powerful were risking the livelihoods of thousands? Are we teaching our children to be like the guards at Abu Ghraib that went along with brutalizing prisoners or the few who refused to take part? Are we teaching our children to build a house in suburbia with a privacy fence to hide behind or to get involved in their communities serving others?

We use the metaphor of family to describe our church, so it is also worth asking what values does our church family possess? We use the metaphor with good reason. The New Testament uses it repeatedly to refer to what a church should be. Does our church look only inward at its own particular issues or its members’ own needs or are we a family that looks outward to serve others and be an integral part of our community? Reinhold Niebuhr wrote his book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, in the 1930’s during the rise of fascism. He questioned how it could be that an entire society could take part in policies that oppressed others. His conclusion was that “Egoistic impulses are so much more powerful than altruistic ones.”⁸ He argued therefore that the church must be a support for those altruistic impulses in individuals for societies to change. Are we as a church helping our community to strengthen its altruistic values, especially towards those especially in need of care and those who have no power or voice? Or, are we as a church merely mirroring the egoistic impulses already rampant in our materialistic society?

When Jesus brought a child to him and pointed to that child as an example of who they were to serve, he was not merely talking about being affectionate towards children. He was also asking them to serve the most powerless part of society, the one with the least control over his or her own destiny. In the ancient world, children were at the bottom of the ladder in terms of being valued and having power in society.⁹ It was a vivid example from Jesus, who would take the role of a servant and wash his disciples’ feet, to demonstrate to them that seeking after power and glory and selfish comfort are not the values of someone wishing to follow Jesus. Instead, in the Realm of God, the one who is the greatest will be the least and the first shall be the last. There are more important things than self-gratification. These are the values that the church needs to be helping families to emulate.

Going back to my friend Link, as I have contemplated my own role as father to my sons, I have begun to consider that the most important thing I do in my life may very well be helping my boys to grow up to be emotionally healthy individuals that care for others and demonstrate God’s grace to a world in dire need of it. Whatever Link may feel or not feel about ending up as a stay-at-home dad, I’ve decided to call him and to tell

him that his is the most important job in the world. When I consider the people I have encountered who spend their lives thinking of no one but themselves or who apparently never learned to consider how their actions hurt so many others around them, I have come to believe that helping others to broaden their horizons of care and concern is the most important thing any family—including church families—can do to impact our world. Amen.

Rev. Chase Peeples

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First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), St. Joseph, MO

¹ Richard P. Carlson, "Naboth's Vineyard: A Clash of Family Values (1 Kings 21:1-16)," in *The Family Handbook*, edited by Herbert Anderson, et al. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), 214-217.

² As indicated in scripture passages that detail the origins of ancient Israel where God gives the land to the people, such as Exodus 20:12, Leviticus 25:13-28, Numbers 27:1-11, Numbers 36:1-13. See Carlson, 214.

³ Carlson, 214.

⁴ 1 Kings 16:24

⁵ Carlson, 215.

⁶ Ibid 216.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Scribner's, 1932), 266.

⁹ "The low social status and the vulnerability of children [in the Hellenistic World] are powerfully captured in the common practices of infanticide and the exposing of young children, especially girls." John Carroll, "Children in the Bible," *Interpretation* (April 2001), 10. Similarly, Suzanne Dixon notes that in the ancient world high mortality rates resulted in different expressions of grief for children of various ages who died. It was considered bad form to mourn too much the death of a young child, but a death of an adolescent or young adult was worth grieving over. Suzanne Dixon, *The Roman Family* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 99.