

Strong Families

United Congregational Church, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

August 27, 2023 – Sunday Morning Worship

5th Sermon in the Series: *Why church...*

Text: Exodus 1:8-22

This ridiculously divided society in which we live these days in the good old USA allows for the possibility that even the notion of what constitutes a “strong family” could be seen as controversial. Seriously? Unfortunately, this is a sad, but I think accurate assessment of our current situation. Just think back to this past winter’s blow-up controversy over various petitions to remove certain books from public school libraries because a few people thought access to these books they saw as pornographic put their families at risk. Parents didn’t think their kids should even be able to see these books on the shelves, never mind take one down and look at it. Diametrically opposed to this position were those of us who saw in these particular books about the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ youth much needed information and support for these youth and the families trying to support them as they negotiate the challenging paths of gender identity and gender dysphoria. Both sides of this situation made powerful arguments that the actions they were demanding regarding the very same books in school and public libraries were being made in the name of protecting and supporting strong families. Dear ones, this was not a minor disagreement. This was a chasmic divide with two sides both arguing they were the ones interested in the well being of local families. Yet another example of the zero sum attitude all too prevalent these days.

Strong families. What exactly does that mean these days? What does a strong family even look like? How would one go about evaluating what makes for a strong family or even a good one? Here’s the thing, we’ve felt like we already know what constitutes a strong

family, a good family. We even have a sort of fuzzy picture of it in our minds, don't we. A mom and dad would be present – both working these days unlike during my childhood when many moms stayed home, and dads pursued careers. Added to this mix would be the usual 2.5 children, ideally one boy and one girl and another one, whose gender would remain unknown 'til birth, on the way. Usually a dog and a station wagon would be in the photo frame too. And a white picket fence around a tidy home with frilly curtains at the windows. Sound familiar?

I'm sure it does. And, honestly, it describes my family growing up only I was the .5 kid, the only girl and the youngest by 8 years. We had a German Shepherd. We had a white picket fence. We had frilly curtains at the windows and petunias and geraniums in the flower gardens in the front yard and tomatoes in the vegetable garden outside the back door. We even had a station wagon. We were the epitome of everyone's vision of the perfect American family in the 1960's and '70's. I bet many of you can look back on your homes and think something similar. Yes, we looked perfect on the outside – a good family, a strong family. But really, we weren't. We had our share of problems and issues. So did everybody else because the truth is there that never was an ideal all American family. That vision, that dream, that expectation was always flawed. It was flawed because it was never accurate. The faces we presented to the world were what we hoped we were, what we aspired to be, even as we were falling short. My own personal theory is that this is why so many of us now are an anxiety attack looking for a place to happen. We set impossible standards for ourselves that, ultimately, no one could achieve or maintain even if they did get there briefly. The simple truth is, we all bought into a myth of what a good, strong family should look like and we hoped that's who we were. But we weren't.

We weren't because if you look carefully at that image in your memory you will notice that the family in the vision is white, that the kids are healthy, and that mom and dad are smiling. Everyone is well dressed and well fed. The dog is content with Kennel Ration or Alpo dog food and the car never runs out of gas or needs new tires. Dear ones, this was never true. Families even when we were kids came in all kinds and sizes. I grew up with friends who came from single parent homes or homes where they were being raised by grandparents. I bet you did too. I grew up in an unofficially segregated neighborhood where you could count the numbers of black, brown and Asian kids on the fingers of two hands. How about you? And my mom was never content to be a stay at home housewife. She booked out to work as soon as she could justify leaving me on my own so she could resume the career she had loved in retail, one she'd left when my oldest brother came along.

But the really amazing thing about this mythic vision of the all American family of the 1960's and '70s is that I never questioned it – at least not outrightly. Although I admit I did head off to college with grand ideas of a career in journalism pursued in New York as soon as I graduated. But that didn't happen. This goofy, handsome guy tripped over the desk in front of me in Western Civ and life plans changed. We married before graduation and then moved to Corning, NY where Peter had a job. It honestly never occurred to me, or him, or to my parents, or to his parents that it might have made more sense economically for us to live in Pittsburgh since I had a good job with Consolidation Coal. I hated that job, but it was a good one and they really wanted me to stay. But I said no because I was going to follow my new husband to his home base and the low paying social services job he had. I look back at that decision now and I honestly cannot explain why it never occurred to either of us that we could consider

my earning capacity equally with his. Or that perhaps my long range earning capacity might be better than his. Just never, ever occurred to me, to us. What the heck is up with that? The only answer I can come up with is that we had bought into the myth of the American family and what it should look like to such an extent that nothing else was even visible. And the church I grew up in only solidified this vision as a reality to be chased after, sure it could be caught and tamed if you just did the “right” things. The church taught me a traditional way of seeing the world, of seeing myself and my role in that world. It just was. Except, as the years passed by, it wasn’t. One day I realized it never was.

I know I am not alone in this experience of what a strong American family should look like, act like, respond to the world around it. I also know we have all, over the years, seen that American family myth shattered in so many ways we never saw coming. Now more and more of us realize that dream is no longer attainable, if it ever was. More and more of us realize that dream was never even possible for far more families than we would ever have wanted to admit. Black and brown families still experience the redlining that kept them out of white suburbs. Families with incarcerated people among their members still struggle in more ways than we can imagine. Families in need of housing, food and other kinds of basic services are looked down on even more these days than ever before because far too many of us are quick to judge their poverty as being their fault. In short, dear ones, what we have believed to be true about families – our own and the ones we only saw on television – was never an accurate picture of what a strong family is, what it means.

And we do love those fairy tale pictures of strong families we see depicted on television, don’t we. The thing is, those aren’t real either. Of course, we could go down memory lane here remembering all those

family sit-coms we still love. Whether they were blended families like *The Brady Bunch* or traditional families like *Leave It To Beaver*, they reinforced that myth of American families as strong enough to withstand any of the hijinks that teens could cook up. These kinds of television shows and movies have been around for decades, and always so popular not only because they reinforced the myth but also because they made us feel like part of their family, if only for a half hour, one day a week. In 2009 a movie with these same all American family tropes became a classic and a favorite because it showcased the power and possibility a strong American family offers to anyone drawn into its circle. I'm sure you remember it. Called *The Blind Side* it starred Sandra Bullock and Tim McGraw as a wealthy white couple from Tennessee who adopted a black teen out of the ghetto, giving him the chance of a lifetime to escape the unfair hindrances race and his broken family forced him to deal with. I loved that movie when it came out in 2009. I even preached on it once because the story, based on a book of the same name, seemed to lift up what was possible when a family of means learned to look past their privilege and recognize the value in a child from a completely different world than their own. Great story. Great ending too when the child – NFL player Michael Oher did make the transition from private school football to playing at a top college to being chosen for the NFL where he enjoyed a successful multi year career.

However, the movie proved to be more fiction than fact. Even when the movie first came out, there were rumblings that Michael Oher was not entirely happy with the story it told. He felt some things about him were not truthfully portrayed, but he did acknowledge that the Tuohy's had been very good to him and he did consider them family. He did until a few weeks ago, that is. What happened then has been all over the news so perhaps you've heard about it. It seems

that, despite what was portrayed as true in the book and the movie, Leigh Anne and Shawn Tuohy never actually adopted Michael Oher. They told him they did. They even had him sign papers they claimed were adoption papers. But they weren't. They were papers which made them conservators over Michael Oher, a role they have been exercising ever since. Hard as it may be to believe, Michael Oher just learned a few weeks ago that he was not adopted. He was shocked and hurt when he learned the true nature of his relationship with the Tuohy's. He is suing them over the conservatorship in an effort to reclaim a share of the profits which have materialized from the book and the movie. That's how he found out about the conservatorship. Once his NFL career was behind him, he began to look into some things as he prepared for life after football. His lawyer reviewed the documents he had signed in high school and that's when the ugly truth of the conservatorship was revealed. Michael is now suing the Tuohy's to have the conservatorship removed. Strong families indeed.¹

This story of Michael Oher and his experience with the Tuohy's is yet another example of the myth of the power of strong American families. There is so much more that could be said about this situation but that's not where I want to leave us today as we contemplate and ponder this sad story of the truth behind one family. Instead, what I want us to consider this morning is where we can identify powerful examples of what family can and should mean. We see biblical accounts of families throughout the Scriptures, both the Old and New Testaments. What I am inviting us to consider this morning is a story from the very beginning of the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Pentateuch. Exodus is essentially the story of Moses, the great leader of the Israelites who freed them from captivity

¹ <https://the-ard.com/2023/08/22/what-is-the-white-savior-complex/>

in Egypt. Today's text actually precedes his birth, but it is central to the story because it made Moses' birth possible. It is the story of Shiphrah and Puah, the Hebrew midwives who saved his life at birth.

We all know the story of the birth of Moses, the Hebrew baby boy who floated down the river in a basket when his mother wanted to save him from Pharaoh's edict to the midwives that all boy babies should be killed by throwing them into the Nile immediately after birth. Shiphrah and Puah were those Hebrew midwives who were given the unthinkable orders. But they didn't do it. They couldn't do it even though Pharaoh's wrath was sure to come. And it did as soon as he realized there were still too many boy Hebrew babies being born. Sure enough, they were summoned to face his judgment, but they had a plan. They told him the Hebrew women were so "vigorous" that they would give birth to the boy babies before they could get to the mothers to carry out his orders. Pharaoh believed them. The midwives were spared and, the Scriptures tell us, God blessed them with their own families due to their tremendous courage.

Moses was one of those boy babies delivered to a vigorous mother determined to keep him safe, so she hid him until he was three months old. Then she made a special basket that would float, and she put him in the basket hoping he would float down the Nile into the arms of an Egyptian woman who would raise him as her own. And that's just what happened. Pharaoh's own daughter retrieved him from the Nile, and he was raised as a prince of Egypt, with his own mother as his nurse. A strong Hebrew family birthed him against the odds. They maneuvered a situation that allowed him to be raised by another strong family, Pharaoh's own, which would give him the education and training to lead his own people one day.

Dear ones, all this – our own memories, our own families, the story of Michael Oher, the story of Shiphrah and Puah and Moses and

Pharoah – they all teach us the same lesson and it is a simple one. Strong families are made, not created through the accident of birth. Strong families come into being when people acknowledge their need for one another, their love for one another, and the strength and support it takes for any of us to negotiate life through all its ups and downs. All throughout those days of the mythical American family with a mom, a dad, 2.5 kids, a station wagon and a house with a white picket fence and frilly curtains at the windows, the real American family was plodding along, invisible behind the myth. And these families did not look much like the myth at all. Families then and now come in all sizes, all colors, all configurations. Some are wealthy beyond all reason, their prosperity often adding more heartache than help to their days. Some families struggle to keep a roof over the heads of their children, often for reasons beyond their control. Some families have one parent while others have layers of step-parents as divorced parents remarry and create even larger blended families. Many families are caught in the stressful, never-ending merry-go-round of work and endless activities they hope will bring the best opportunities for their children. All families harbor secrets of one kind or another. Families of illegals worry about the knock on the door that will rip their children from their arms as they are deported. Families with LGBTQ kids worry what the future holds as some states seek to control even the medical care of their children. Every family with school age children sends the kids off to school every day with prayers that they get through the day without a school shooting. Unfortunately, these kinds of prayers are too often the only thought too many of our families give to the role of faith and the church in their lives.

I get that. I really do. In far too many ways, the church has not lived up to its responsibility to assist parents create and maintain

those strong families our society depends on. Instead, we have gotten sidetracked by superficial, even faddish programming for children and youth. We lost sight of the truth that what families need as they raise their children is not more stuff to do but instead assistance in creating a bedrock faith upon which their lives can be built. We must remember that all children learn and experience faith best by seeing that faith modeled by adults they love and trust. Maybe those adults are their own families but maybe not. Maybe the adults who love them are as confused about God and the church as they are. And that's where we in the church enter the picture – this image of the possibilities of the American family as it really is rather than how we might wish it was.

Put another way, dear ones, we need to remember and put into practice the promises we have made over the years to so many children that we will “provide our love, support and care” to them and to every family into which they are born. And we need to do this for all the children we know, not only the ones we have seen at our own baptismal font. How do we do that? Well, that is the question isn't it. Greater minds than ours are trying to figure it out. Ultimately, though, it comes down to each one of us.

How do we live our faith? How do we show through the love we embody outside these walls that our faith is continually transforming who we are? How do we live each day as though Jesus really matters to us? How do we move beyond our reticence to share our faith with the people who matter the most to us – our own children and grandchildren, our own nieces and nephews? How do we overcome all the negativity connected with other Christian churches that preach exclusion and rejection as God's truth when it so clearly isn't? My goodness, now that's a task list that feels overwhelming and impossible! Maybe it is. But I know one thing for sure. If we don't

try, nothing will change. I also know beyond any shadow of doubt that with God, all things are possible. Even this. Amen.