

Sermon for 2 Lent C  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Wareham  
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I don't know anything that can make us crazier faster than family. Do you? They make us crazy with worry and they lead us to act crazy. Truly.

My daughter Becca is in college, which is great, but she is unhappy, which is not. So she decided to transfer to another school. Two weeks before the deadline for applications, she calls me up and says, "Mom! Which schools should I apply to?" To my credit, I said, "Gee, I don't know." But then I was awake half the night worrying about her.

We get crazy with worry—about kids—are they happy—do they eat enough/too much—do they have friends/the right kind of friends—are they doing drugs/in trouble/driving safely? Have you ever seen the "Mom Song" on YouTube? It about sums up what parents worry about. But we also worry about siblings, parents, spouses—we get crazy worried.

And then we just plain act crazy. I have a friend. Her mom's a mean drunk. Has been for years. Even when she doesn't drink, she puts down my friend, excludes her from family gatherings, says awful things about her to her sister. And yet, when this mother calls and asks for help, which is several times a week, my friend drops everything and drives 20 miles to go help out her mother—and be taken advantage of. And she knows better! But then we all have the places where we do things like this.

You see, family is important. We say, "I do" or "hello baby"—we make vows either spoken or implied to family members—and then we get sucked into crazy behavior. And this craziness takes two main forms—either we think that the vows mean that a spouse or family members is responsible for our happiness, or else we think that they mean that we are responsible for the other's happiness.

First—we expect that our husband or wife or child or parent is supposed to make us happy—no—**is responsible** for our happiness. What a set-up! That person is **so** going to fail! After the first blush of marriage wears off, you find out that your husband or wife snores or has bad breath or annoying habits or emotional baggage or addiction or all the above. And guess what, the same is true for you, too. But if your spouse or family member wanted to cater to your every need, they wouldn't be able to read your mind, and they will fail. We set them up, and when they fail we can blame them for our unhappiness. And then we're off the hook—we don't have to take any responsibility for the fact that our lives are a mess. We can just complain and resent the other. Convenient, but crazy.

The second major craziness—and we women are especially prone to this—is expecting and believing that we are responsible for the happiness of others. We think it's our job to get our wife or husband to stop drinking or our children out of jail or our parents to use their money more carefully. But it isn't our job. And when we try to control others, we will not only make ourselves and them miserable, we will still fail.

Yes, when we are parents of minor children, we do have an obligation to provide a safe environment, but even that can become twisted. I know a woman who had her first child when she was young. And her father said to her, "If anything happens to my grandson, it's **your fault!**" When the child was six weeks old, she was walking into her house—it was winter—and she slipped and fell on the

ice. The baby's head hit the edge of the stairs and put a dent into the soft bones of the skull. Though the child was OK, the mother was mortified and vowed then and there that she would never allow anything to harm her son. Decades later, she is still trying to keep her grown son safe, something that is a) not possible and b) not healthy for either one.

We get tempted into wrong relationship with family because family is so important. But we fall into disordered priorities—otherwise known as sin. We either have family as way too important, putting it above everything else, and then trying to control others, make them behave, love us, be successful, stay healthy, or else we get hurt and neglect them or even hurt them back.

Abram also had family problems. Abram was 75 and childless when God called him on a journey to an unknown destination, promising him children and land. Abram and Sarah gamely went along, traveling here and there, never staying for long. They desperately wanted family, even more important in that era before Social Security. Years went by, and despite God's promise, they had no children. So God comes again to Abram and says, "Hey, Abram, have I got good stuff in store for you!" And Abram says, "Yeah, right. The one thing I want is children, and you haven't given me any." And God says, "Just you wait—you're going to have more descendants than stars in the sky"—the Lord was given to exaggeration!—but the point was, God was going to give Abram a son. And Abram—90 years old—believed God! And then God says, "And—I am going to give you all this land, too." Well, that might have been stretching his belief, so Abram asks, "How am I going to know that?"

And this rather bizarre event takes place—Abram is to go get a cow, goat, sheep, and two birds, and cut them in to, placing the halves facing each other. Then as the sun is setting, Abram fell asleep and a smoking fire pot and smoking torch passed between the cut up animals. This was an early version of "marriage"—making a vow or a covenant. To ratify a covenant, you cut up animals and walk between them, possibly with the understanding that if you break the vow, you'll end up like the cut-up animals. Only here, it is God, the divine light and power, who is going between the animals, making a covenant to Abram. I, the Lord, will be your God, and I will provide you, Abram, with land forever and with descendants. Abram doesn't do anything here; it is God who is making the covenant. This is the "Old Covenant" or "Old Testament"—the original agreement that God makes with us, his people. "I will be your God and you will be my people." And part of this agreement for Abram is that he and Sarah get a child—eventually. Which they do, in the form of Isaac, about 9 nine years later.

The only one who can make grandiose vows and keep them is God. And God's covenant is to be our God. To love us and guide us and provide for us no matter what. The whole point of the New Testament, the New Covenant in Jesus' death and resurrection is demonstrating the "no matter what." Even if we do the worst things possible, like killing the Son of God, God says, "I am still your God and you and still my people. I still love you and will not abandon you."

We get our priorities out of order when we think that family comes first. Family is important, but God comes first. When we look to family members to provide for us and give us security and love us unconditionally, we mess up the relationships. As humans, we just can't do those things. We will always fail. It is God who loves us primarily and unconditionally. Our grounding for all other relationship comes from our relationship with God.

So how do we relate to family members? What approach should we take?

The first way is through prayer. How are we to be God's households? God is first. And trusting God is key. Abram believed God, trusted God, and was seen as righteous by God. God is trustworthy, so we can trust God. We are already loved, so we don't have to glom onto others to provide that for us. We'll only suck them dry and still not be satisfied. Our relationship to God is primary. If we really believe that and look for our main sustenance there, we will be much freer to love family in a healthy way.

If we stay rooted in prayer, we stay connected to the one who knows and loves us best. And so often we think we can and should control others, direct their lives, tell them what to do. We spend lots of time telling others, "Get a job! Go to that school! Eat this/don't eat that!" But believe it or not, we are not God. We do not know what is right for the other person. Only God knows what is right. When we pray, we can ask God to do for our loves ones, being confident that God knows better than we do.

Next, if we know ourselves as beloved children of God, we are called into relationships with **humility**. Only God can fully keep the vows he makes; even when we truly want to keep the vows we make, we will fail. We have to know that we will fail and that others who try to love us will fail, so that we have a realistic view of our capabilities. God **knows** that we will fail. That's why forgiveness is so important; God forgives us, we can forgive others and be forgiven. Family relationships mean give and take. If you expect perfection—from yourself or others—you will be disappointed. The best we can do is try hard and when we mess up, seek forgiveness and move on.

Finally, we need to hold our family relationships lightly in our hands. Our family relationships are a gift. We are to be grateful for whatever is good and lovely in these people. So often we try to squeeze hard to hold onto to spouses or children and you kill them that way—trying to make children behave or make our parents quit drinking or force our spouse to love us. And sometimes we try to hold onto relationships long after they've died. Hold them lightly. Enjoy the good, let children grow up and spouses grow and change. And if a relationship goes bad or dies, let it go. Walk away.

But don't put family before God. Years later, God came back to Abraham and said, "Abraham. Take your son, your only son, your beloved son, and take him up that mountain over there. And then sacrifice him to me." God was testing Abraham. Who do you love more—your son or me?" What a terrible thing to be asked! But Abraham passed the test. He knew that Isaac was a gift from God, and was willing to give him back to God, even though it broke his heart.

I don't think God would do such a thing today. And yet even today, we have lots of opportunities to consider our priorities—who do we love more, God or our family members? Hold them lightly. Put God first.

Believe it or not, we were made for much better siblings, parents, spouses, and children when we prioritize right. We can create households that are healthy and balanced by rooting ourselves in our primary relationship—to God. We accept our own and others' imperfections, we take care of our own needs and own relationship to God first, and stop pouring ourselves unhealthily into others, or neglecting others to "punish" them. Prayer, humility, light hands—God knows this is the way to abundance in our family life. Amen.