

Vital Signs of a Healthy Family

**A Sermon Preached by
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[Y]ou are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

1 Peter 2:9-10

[Y]ou are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

Ephesians 2:19-22

Our scriptures today describe the church like a household or family. And we'd like to think that every God honoring family is perfect. But some of the most dysfunctional families I've ever met are in the Bible. Consider Jacob's family. With the help of his mother, Rebekah, Jacob cheated his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance. Then his father-in-law-to-be, Laban, cheated him, twice, before Jacob got the better of him and ended up marrying *both* daughters, Rachel and Leah. Years later one of Jacob's sons slept with one of Jacob's concubines, and, when his only daughter, Dinah, was assaulted her brothers massacred an entire village for revenge. The irony is that Jacob is known as the "Father of the Twelve Tribes of Israel." This may be true, but when it comes to raising families it's a little hard to say about him, "Father knows best." Jacob's family makes *our* families look like "The Cleavers." I'm not throwing stones here. All families face

challenges: Biblical families, our families, even church families. All families get “sick” from time to time.

Today, however, I want to look at what makes a family *healthy*. Over the past few weeks I’ve been thinking and praying about the “vital signs” of a *healthy* family. I thought about what the Bible teaches, and about Christian families that I know and respect, many of them in our own congregation. I came up with four questions that we can ask to help determine the health of a Christian family. Just like a doctor might ask if you’ve been eating right and exercising, one way to tell if a family is healthy is to ask:

Do family members enjoy hanging-out together and do they do it regularly? Before Kari and I had kids we spent a lot of time together, eating, talking, doing chores, shopping, watching TV, just hanging out. Fast forward 10 or so years and add two kids and now we’re pulled in so many different directions by activities, school, work, volunteering, and so on that we feel blessed when we can actually sit down and enjoy a meal together with our kids all eating at the same time. We’ve noticed that we have to be intentional about building family times into our day and week. We know that it’s by spending simple times together *now* that we will forge the bonds that will tie us together years from now when we’re separated from our boys by miles and time zones.

Family ties are so important. When I’m at the bedside of an elderly patient who is dying I am often amazed to see who comes to visit. Sometimes it’s almost no one. Many times, though, it’s children and grandchildren and in-laws and cousins—and their spouses and kids. They all come to cry together. I suspect it’s because years earlier they spent a lot of time laughing together over meals, games, and more.

How’s your family doing with this—do you make spending time together a priority?

Here at Second we’re developing a new Kirk night ministry that’s going to help families with young kids to have fun together. Instead of sending kids in one direction and parents in another we’re going to eat, play, and worship *together*. Notice in the Bible how much time the first Christians spent together eating, praying, and caring for each other. That’s what kept them strong through the dark times. Perhaps you can find

additional ways to connect with your family. It doesn't happen by accident. We have to make it a priority.

A second way to tell if a family is healthy is to ask, **is everyone contributing?** One of my favorite families is the Pryor family. They live in New Jersey. I worked with Jonathan, the dad, several years ago and I've kept up with him in the meantime. When I met Jonathan he was single. Today he is the father of 12. He and his wife, Jan, have adopted kids from five countries on three continents. They range in age from 2 to 19 years old. We joke that there ought to be a reality TV show about them. You would tune in to see a home that appears to be chaotic—kids everywhere, dogs running around, tables piled with homework and groceries and unfinished art projects. But if you'd watch long enough you'd find that each of the kids has clear responsibilities, not just for themselves but for each other and for the family. Everyone contributes in their own way. Everyone has an investment in the family's success. That's why, when they choose to open their home to one more kid, it's easy for them to pull together – because everyone feels like they are part of the decision and everyone knows their role in making things work.

Parents sometimes try to make life easy for their kids by doing everything for them. Of course that only makes life harder for those kids later on. And it weakens the family. When are those kids going to learn that building a strong family takes everyone working together? It's too late when mom has broken a hip and the kids need to step up and care for her. That's not the way of the Bible. In Jesus' day it was presumed that children had specific roles and responsibilities for helping the family.

Can you say that in your family everyone has a role and is contributing to the best of their ability? If not, why not? It may not be too late to change that pattern.

In our Second Family we've been involving more and more people in leadership decisions, like setting budgets and determining priorities. We're expanding our committees to include more people and training lay people to do things that we once might have thought only a "pastor" could do. We teach that every member can be a minister and every member can be a missionary, and we really do believe that, from the youngest to the eldest among us, we all have gifts from God to share. In fact, some of our most active mission workers are our youth, and some of our most dedicated

volunteers are in their 80s. Our system of congregational care is built around everyone doing their part: pastors, deacons, Stephen Ministers, Christ Care Groups, Support Group leaders and people in the pews. Just like a human body, when one part suffers the whole body feels it. We're making progress, but we've got a long way to go before we can say that every member knows that they have a calling, understands it, feels good about it, and carries it out. That's something we're working on.

I wonder: Do you feel a vital part of things here – like you're a player and not just a spectator?

Another way you can tell whether a family is healthy is to ask, **are its members preparing for the future?** Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow but he never said don't *prepare* for it. In fact, he told us to "Get ready!" Yet many of us act like tomorrow is never going to come. The death rate around here is hovering around 100%, but how many of us have our wills, insurance, and the rest of our financial house in order? Most of us want to retire someday (if we're not already retired): are we preparing for it *now*? Most of us will need the help of our kids someday, but have we talked to them about what kind of support we'll want when that day comes? These questions are difficult ones and they may involve awkward conversations with spouses and kids. But it's healthy sign when families are willing to work through the awkwardness and bring these issues out into the open. When we share our hopes and dreams for the future with each other (as well as our fears), we are often inspired to take steps now so that we can be better prepared for the future as it arrives.

What steps do you need to take *now* to prepare your family for the years ahead?

In our Second Family we're beginning to have some critical conversations about our congregation's future. We have a basement that hasn't been upgraded in 40 years. It once served us well, but it's no longer fit for the needs of our growing numbers of children and youth. The Trustees have told us that, among several other maintenance issues, we have several heat pumps that are going to need to be replaced in the next 5 to 10 years. It's time to save for their replacement. We own more land than we are currently using for ministry. How can we make the most of it? Many people in our congregation are moving toward retirement and beyond: how do we keep a strong commitment to young families while serving older

members? We're talking to each other about these questions now so that we'll be strong for whatever God calls us to do in 10 years.

A fourth question we can ask of a family is, **is it living for itself or is it reaching out others as well?** I had a friend in college, Dan, whose family was so tightly knit that I really envied them. Dan and his three brothers did everything together during the summer. His parents attended every one of his concerts with the school band. They all had nicknames for each other and lots of cool family traditions and stories. When you saw them together, they laughed so hard, that *you* wanted to be "in" on the joke, too.

But you couldn't get in. There was no room for anyone new, because they pretty much thought they had it all together. It was only later that I could see that they took good care of each other – as healthy families do – but it stopped there. They didn't do any *real* charitable work; they gave only when it felt good (and in ways that others noticed); the parents volunteered only so long as their kids were still in the program; they had a beautiful home, and a shore house, too, but for them the idea of tithing to their church was just a scam created by ministers.

The Old Testament has laws against "inbreeding" for good reason: families get weak when they rely only on themselves and when they invest only in themselves. Love is meant to flow even beyond our families. As we often say, charity begins at home, but it can't stop there.

In what ways is your family stretching itself to welcome and care for others? One of the best ways to do this is through sponsoring a child through an organization like World Vision or Compassion International. You can be sure that thousands of kids in Haiti will need our help in the months and years ahead. Another way is by making a point of taking a family mission trip instead of a vacation one year. It can be half the cost and just as refreshing. And you'll come away with memories that last longer than most of the souvenirs you can buy in the Poconos.

As a Second Family we're working on making it easier for visitors and new members to learn about our congregation, including our unique traditions and values. Our new website --- GrowWithSecond.org --- is part of that effort. And we're improving signage in the halls so new members can find their way around the building more easily.

And we're continuing to find creative ways to reach out beyond our walls. The harsh reality of the recession is that budget dollars available for mission have become more precious. So we're expanding our commitment to our mission partners in ways that are just as important as dollars but can't be as easily quantified. We've made a 5-year commitment to the people of Honduras and we're hosting the Hinderliters from Lithuania. Our Inquirers will soon be volunteering at Project SHARE and in May we'll be hosting homeless people in the Rotunda through Carlisle CARES. None of this shows up in the Outreach budget, but it's all our Second Family reaching out to our community and world.

I want to invite you to ask four questions of your first family, and then of this, your Second Family:

1. Are we having fun together?
2. Is everyone contributing?
3. Are we preparing for the future?
4. Are we reaching out beyond ourselves?

These questions might serve as a good guide as you think about your own family in the months ahead. And they might even guide us as a congregation as we seek to discern what God is calling us to be and do. Amen.

Dear Friend,

I hope you have been blessed by this message. You can request a free audio-tape or CD recording of this sermon by contacting the church office. We also have a complete sermon archive (including audio-files and PDFs) on-line at www.GrowWithSecond.org/sermons

Second Presbyterian Church is a thriving congregation celebrating over 175 years of service to God and God's people. It would be our joy to help you grow in faith, hope, and love. Please consider being our guest for Sunday worship at 8 or 10:30am. Children's Church and infant and toddler care are always provided.

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