

Do you ever feel confused? Do you ever just find yourself wondering, what has happened?

Once upon a time, a magician worked on a cruise ship. The audience was different each week, so the magician did the same tricks over and over again. One problem was, the captain's parrot saw the shows each week and began to understand how the magician did every trick. Once he understood, he started shouting in the middle of the show: "Look, it's not the same hat!" "Look, he's hiding the flowers under the table." "Hey, why are all the cards the ace of spades?"

The magician was furious but couldn't do anything. It was, after all, the captain's parrot.

Then the ship hit an iceberg and sank! The magician found himself on a lifeboat in the middle of the sea with, as fate would have it, the parrot. They stared at each other with hatred but did not utter a word. This went on for a day and then a second day then a third. Finally on the fourth day, the parrot could not hold back: "OK, I give up. Where's the ship?!"

Do you ever feel confused? Do you ever wonder, what happened? Of course you do. In fact, many of us are waking up, looking at the world around us and saying, "What has happened to my world? It is changing so much. So many things are going wrong. What can I do?"

Today we are beginning a new sermon series called, *At the Crossroads: Allowing Our Faith to Guide us in a Confusing World*. We are going to attempt to look at some of the big issues of our day and ask, how as people of faith, can we think about these? How can we begin to live facing these difficult issues of our world, as thoughtful followers of Jesus Christ? Whether we like it or not, we are about to be bombarded by many of them during the upcoming political season?

Now, I understand there is a risk in talking about these pretty controversial issues. I understand that I am taking a risk of upsetting everyone and pleasing no one. I understand that it would be much easier for me, to focus on matters of faith and not get into some of these controversial issues. I understand that.

But I also know that you are thinking about them. Some of you might have already made up your minds about some of these issues. Some of you might be wondering how can we respond in faith to these issues?

*Today I want to talk about family values.* If we simply let the political rhetoric define family values, you get the idea the family values really means reclaiming traditional roles for men and women AND combating gay marriage. For me, this is simply inadequate, because it ignores the real, critical issues at stake.

What are the critical issues facing families in our nation right now? The divorce rate in our nation is approaching 50%. Too many parents are not home. We know that family income is up, not because wages are up, but because individuals are working multiple jobs. I know one family where the husband is working 3+ jobs and the wife is working two jobs. Does anyone want to guess what happens with the children? You and I both know the children are left alone to raise themselves and fend for themselves. Many parents are simply not being responsible parents teaching their children about respect and community. These are family values. What on earth can we do?

*First of all, we can re-define the family values issues.* We can do this by being more open to a new definition of family. In the past, the family, most likely the extended family was a part of a larger community; where each one in the community helped raise the children.

Because of the mobility of our society, there has been a breakdown of family. But instead of simply calling us to return to a nuclear family of a father and mother with children, why can't we recognize that there are all types of families? There are two individuals as a committed couple, with and without children. There are single parents of both sexes. Just having a mother and a father doesn't solve the problem.

The issue for whatever your family makeup is, is how can we begin to place ourselves into a larger community of people who can help us raise our children, and live whole healthy lives ourselves. We need to spend time with our children. We need to give our children healthy models of adult behavior, and healthy mentors in life as well as in faith.

*We can re-define economic issues as family issues.* When more and more of the children in our world are living without healthcare, it hurts us all. Stagnant wages, the loss of health care and other benefits, the rising cost of housing, and the attitude of trying to keep up with our neighbor view of consumerism is killing our culture. We need to realize that economic stress causes parents to spend less time with children, which directly contributes to the violence in our society.

So, what else can we do? In addition to redefining family values, as **people of Jesus Christ, we need to remember who we are.**

When I left the house in high school, my dad would occasionally say, "Scott, remember who you are tonight." I hated it when he said that. It took me a long time to realize that was his way of keeping me grounded in the reality of who I am. I was and am a member of a family that has worked hard in life. I was and am, a follower of Jesus Christ, so when the temptations of youth would come my way, my father wanted me grounded in an identity.

If we stay grounded in faith, we will remember to do what the author of proverbs invites us to do: *To live well in the eyes of God and of people around you.* Living well means keeping our priorities centered in God. It means remembering that God has blessed me so I can be a blessing to others.

**Third, because we remember who we are, as a church, we can commit to helping each other.** That may certainly mean that as a church when one of our members is hurting, we will at least continue to provide meals or rides for them. That is one way we can support families. It can also mean providing emotional support and prayer support to people in need.

It also might mean finding ways to take positive responsibility for our children. It can be as simple as teaching them the value of respect and the value of caring for our world. It might potentially mean that we are going to start an after school program as a way to help children who have no place to go when school is out.

As it church, it might mean that we have a group of people working with our outreach committee to deal with the issues of poverty and injustice in our community and in the world around us. It might mean that we continue to partner with groups like Bread for the World and continue to let our political leaders know that we, as people of faith, are deeply concerned about poverty and how that is affecting families in our world. *But ultimately it is going to mean that we simply take time to care for each other and to care for those in our midst, because God calls us to care.*

Several years ago, I was serving a church in Northern Wisconsin. The neighborhood was made up of low income families and high income families within a couple blocks of the church. The church building and grounds experienced some vandalism. It was disappointing and disheartening

for some in the church. I admit my first reaction was to call the police, which we did.

Then I started asking questions at the school. I had the good fortune of finding out in a short time who the children were that did the damage. I contacted the police and let them know. They asked if I wanted to press charges. I asked for a couple of days. I then went to the homes of the two offenders. I spoke directly with a single mother of one and a single father of another. I outlined what happened at the church. I shared the evidence I had.

Both parents were terrific to work with. They asked if they could pay for the damage. I indicated they could if they wanted to, but what I would rather do, is I would rather their sons come to the church at on a specific day and clean up the damage they had done with some members of the church. The parents agreed. On the appointed day, a group of people from the church came to work and clean the damage. The children were also there. They worked side by side. It made a huge impression on the children and their families. It made a huge impression on a couple of families from the church.

In the end, the church was cleaned up. But it showed something incredibly important. It showed that the church really could be a community that expressed the healing presence of God. And that is what gives me hope.

May we learn to live real family values that make a difference for families in this world. May God help us to live lives of faith.

Amen.