



John 1:10-14

TITLE

HAPPY FAMILIES CARD GAME

I'm sure that many of you like me played a game called Happy Families when you were young? It's quite an old game as you can see from the collection of old playing cards on the screen.

HAPPY FAMILIES HEADER

Happy Families was a product of the Victorian period and is an early example of a trend in family life that went well into the Twentieth Century. It was called the nuclear family – Mum and Dad and two happy little kiddies.

A REFLECTION OF TRADITIONAL FAMILY VALUES?

I'm the product of a typical nuclear family: mum, dad, girl boy. That picture is loved of advertisers but actually, real families are much more complicated than that. Even when Happy Families the card game was invented, families lived together as extended families mum, dad, a number of children and sometimes with grandparents, uncles, aunts and cousins. We live in a modern world of real families and they can be just as complicated as the extended families of many years ago – more of that in a minute.

Let me go back to the passage that we looked at last week and one verse in it:

GENESIS 1:27

He created them male and female, blessed them, and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control."

When God created the human race, he created them to be stewards of His world. They were created as social beings and families are at the core of society.

FAMILY TREE

Look through the Bible and you'll see plenty of evidence of family trees. They are popular today, particularly as people can search for their ancestors on the internet. Why are our ancestors important? Because they show where we came from and who we are related to.

CAIN AND ABEL

Even though God created families I wasn't long before families became dysfunctional. God may have created families to be functional. But sin can make them very dysfunctional. The dysfunctional family is a modern term we have come to use to describe families that have ceased to be harmonious for one reason or another. Things just don't work. It's a modern term but dysfunctional families have existed for thousands of years – it's just that in times past things were not often spoken about or swept under the carpet.

FAMILIES COME IN ALL SHAPES AND SIZES

So families actually come in all shapes and sizes. That's important to understand as church in the past was too often identified with the Happy Families model and people's lives just aren't like that any more – in fact they were ever like that. That said, just because families come in all shapes and sizes, it doesn't mean that they are dysfunctional. Families can be functional whether they be nuclear, extended, one-parent or step-families; and dysfunctionality can happen to any type of family, whether nuclear, extended, one-parent or step.

CHURCH IS A FAMILY

Of course, Church is a family. God bases what He calls us into on what He's created for the world. Let's read some of the verses we had earlier: *Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children. They did not become God's children by natural means, that is, by being born as the children of a human father; God himself was their Father.*

If we are trusting and following Jesus then we are the children of God and we are part of God's family. The difference between God's family, the church and earthly families is that Christians all enter God's family only through adoption.

GOD HAS NO GRANDCHILDREN – a phrase used by Welsh Revivalist Evan Roberts. God's family is not the typical nuclear family. It's a single parent family with lots of children – all adopted!

Unfortunately, God's family, the church, can become very dysfunctional. It's invariably due to sin and disobedience to the Father – where do you think all those denominations came from?

FAMILIES ARE IMPORTANT TO GOD

Where I am going with this is affirming that families are important to God. He created the notion of families and family life and this model describes His relationship with His children. At the beginning of the 21st century it is also becoming an issue for the church. It is just a case of simple maths that our church has an ageing population. In some ways that's not surprising as the nation's population is ageing and this is after all a town attractive for retirement.

But look at all the churches in Felixstowe and you'll find the older generation disproportionately higher in churches than in the local population. It's fairly simple maths to realise that in less than a generation there will be hardly anyone young left in the church if new people don't come in. We are almost completely missing a generation in the church. There are many reasons for that but we can't afford to ignore the issue for a simple basic reason. If people are without Christ – they are lost. We have a call to reach them and share Good News with them – that's our call and mission because it is the call and mission of Jesus – to make disciples of all people (Matt 28). Other churches in town have already realised the same and started to look as to how they can reach out. It's our responsibility to do the same, not just because the figures don't add, but because people are not hearing about Jesus and they should.

SOME TRENDS IN UK FAMILY LIFE

To reach families we need to understand them. Let me read some conclusions of a couple of trends in modern families which I guess won't surprise you.

Social Issues Research Centre (2008)

Most children still live in a 'traditional' family unit in one household, with two parents (*but could be step parents*)

Birth rates have declined in recent years, nuclear families have become smaller

Women are having children later in life (*because of careers*)

Marriage rates have decreased, but marriage remains the most common form of partnership

Divorce rates have increased overall, but are now in decline (*mostly because people aren't getting married*)

The number of lone parent families has increased substantially

An increasing number of children live with step-parents

The number of people cohabiting has also increased

Families in Britain IPSOS/MORI (Sarah Jenkins/Isabella Pereira/Natalie Evans) April 2009

- a massive feminisation of the workforce since the second world war;
- widespread contraception leading to deferred decisions about the start of families; and
- divorce, remarriage and cohabitation becoming much more acceptable.

Families are no longer just made up of married parents living with their children. Although seven in ten households are still headed up by married couples, this proportion has been declining for some time. Families are now a mix of cohabiting parents, step families, single parent families, those living apart together and civil partnerships, as well as the traditional nuclear family.

As a result of these changes, families are now less stable than in previous generations. Children often grow up with different parents - in step-families, or with one parent figure missing. These children are more likely to experience poverty, poor health and well-being and be involved in antisocial behaviour.

VIEWS OF CHURCH

Now we all know that there has been a general decline in church attendance in the last 30 years or so which has now slowing down, but the decline has been larger in the sub-40 age group and they are generally under-represented in most denominations.

Why has this been the case? It's partly explained by social trends. There have been falling birth rates which mean that there are less under 40s in the population than in previous decades. But there have been some other trends which help explain the lack of interest in the Christian faith and in church. The reasons are many but here's three – all based on misconceptions of church - because we already have a missing generation of people who have little experience of church and don't have much of a clue of what the Christian faith is all about.

IMPOSSIBLE - they see Christianity is about do-gooders, people with high moral standards which they can't or don't want to reach. Church is something different, inaccessible, full of strange people – like Dot Cotton.

IRRELEVANT – actually, by and large we live in a world where most people think that the Christian faith is irrelevant. A joke. And scientists have disproved God haven't they? They can't see how God relates to their life even if they believe. Worse if they are interested in spiritual things, they don't see Christians as having the answer.

INCONVENIENT – on the other hand, even if they think Christianity is OK, church is often inconvenient. Years ago children were sent to Sunday School or clubs. These days they have to go to the supermarket, or spend Sunday, the family day on family activities, or play computer games, or go and see a parent if one is not living at home.

CONSEQUENCES FOR THE CHURCH

- the missing generation – sub-40s are already missing from most churches
- as a result of missing families, we miss their children too. The rate of exit in the noughties was massive.
- We have an un-churched generation of people who just don't have much of a clue about the Christian faith and no inclination to find out because they have a long expectation of life and so “if you died tonight” evangelism often doesn't work. In fact, telling them about Jesus often doesn't work either because they know nothing about Him.

SOLUTIONS

- accept people as Jesus does – where they are! Where do people get their misconceptions about church from. A variety of places. But the important thing for us is not to be the stumbling block and the source of misconceptions. We read that the Word became a human being and lived among us. He came into our neighbourhood – ate our food, drank our drink, walked our walk, lived our life. We need to step over what is a generation divide, understand these folks, deal with their issues, speak the unchanging Good News in their language.

It can be done. It's interesting that some of the fastest growing churches in the UK are young churches; full of young families. It's done by understanding that generation and meeting it's spiritual needs. Grasping the nettle means receiving people as Jesus would. Actually we are quite good at that in MRBC, so at least we have a start. Now we need to make it our mission to understand the culture of people that are our children and grandchildren and communicate Good News to them

- having done that we walk with them on their journey, helping them on their way. Moral values are very different in our society from years ago. Our problem as Christians is that God's values don't change. As people come to faith they have to deal with issues in their life which which they discover are not God's ways. What do we do – condone their lifestyle? Or condemn it? Neither. We are here to encourage and help people walk in God's way. Repentance and following Jesus is something that can be a long road – we all need one another to walk with us on it. That can be challenging and creative.
- Finally we address misconceptions. How do we show people we aren't wierdos? Sometimes communicating the Good News starts with showing people we're normal. We address what they are asking. It usually isn't about sin and heaven, but “is there a God”.

TITLE

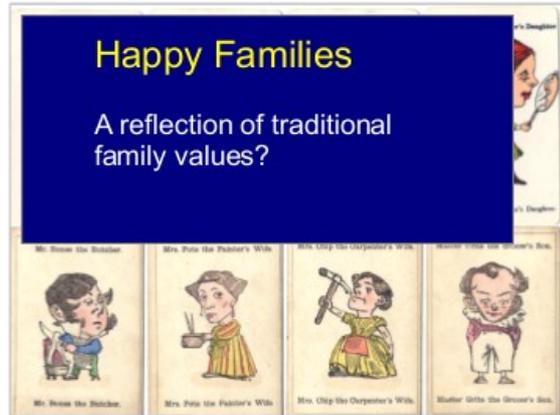
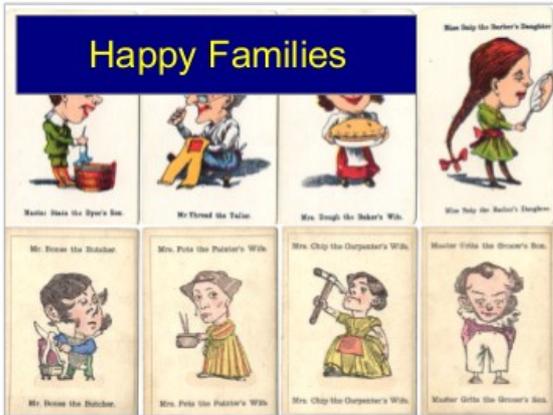
This morning, I'm leaving you with questions rather than answers because that's where we're at. I've suggested some basic principles along the lines of "Jesus did this". We need to grab a vision for this lost generation. Frankly, it doesn't start with us doing activities, although I have some planned which deals with people on the misconception level – to show that Christians are real people and the Christianity is exciting and vibrant.

What it does start with is those of us who have been around a while to start being Jesus to families. To understand without prejudice, to receive without judging, to listen without preaching at them, to lead people into paths of righteousness rather than separate.

This is the start – we have a call to reach these people – let's seek God's face.

Prayer

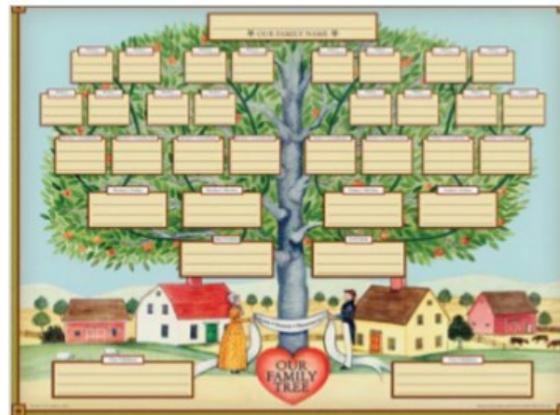
*Preached by Mark Reid
MRBC Felixstowe 10/7/11
(c) Mark Reid 2011*



Happy Families?

He created them male and female, blessed them, and said, "Have many children, so that your descendants will live all over the earth and bring it under their control."

Genesis 1:27



Happy Families?

Dysfunctional families aren't new!

Happy Families?

Families come in all shapes and sizes

Church is a family

"God has no Grandchildren"

Evan Roberts



Families are important to God



Some trends in UK family life



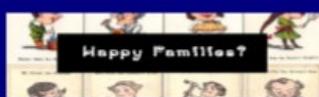
Views of Church

- impossible
- irrelevant
- inconvenient



Consequences for the Church

- decline in sub 40s in churches
- decline of children's and youth work
- the "un-churched generation"



Solutions

- accept people as Jesus does
- walk with them on their journey
- address misconceptions