All that has since fallen apart. Today, says Brooks, “only a minority of American households are traditional two-parent nuclear families and only one-third of American individuals live in this kind of family.” Brooks adds that the “1950–65 window was not normal. It was a freakish historical moment when all of society conspired, wittingly and not, to obscure the essential fragility of the nuclear family.”

My purpose today is not to knock the nuclear family. But Brooks’ statement about extended families being the norm for “tens of thousands of years before 1950” helps us realize just how remarkable is the fifth of the Ten Commandments: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus 20:12).

The commandment is remarkable in an age and place when the language did not have a separate term for “nuclear family” and where four generations at a time typically lived together. In fact, the Hebrew word for family, bayit, is a flexible term, covering all those who live in one dwelling. That could be a married couple and their children, but it might also cover multiple generations of relatives (by blood or marriage), as well as servants, slaves, concubines, resident immigrants, sojourners, day laborers, and orphans. Thus, when someone in ancient Israel used the word “family” (bayit), hearers would think of what we today call an “extended family.”

Brooks mentions two strengths of extended families. One is *r*esilience. In extended families, there are others who help the parents to carry out the daily tasks of life. And if, for example, a mother dies or a father loses his job, siblings, aunts, uncles, and grandparents can fill the void. If one person finds parenting especially difficult, others can fill the breach. And when crises happen, older family members may provide some helpful advice or perspective. The other primary strength is as a socializing force. “Multiple adults teach children right from wrong, how to behave toward others, how to be kind,” says Brooks. And in a culture that often seems to have no taboos, extended families can be “a moral haven in a heartless world.”

It stands to reason that growing up in a family which is a resilient and socializing force increases your likelihood of having a better life, and maybe even a longer life as the commandment suggests. In the restatement of this commandment in Deuteronomy 5, the wording is “Honor your father and your mother…so that your days may be long and that it may go well with you in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” (v. 16, emphasis added). Notice that this is the *only* commandment which offers such a blessing.

So, with these benefits of extended families so evident, why doesn’t the commandment say, “Honor your elders, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you” or “Honor your kin...” or “Honor your household…”? Honestly, we do not know. The Bible never explains it. But the commandment singles out parents for honor and respect. The commandment sought to make sure that parents who could no longer contribute to the family unit’s financial viability would not be disregarded or displaced after they could no longer work.

By looking at the original Hebrew, we also know that this commandment is not calling for us to obey our parents. The word used is “honor” (kābēd), which includes among its meanings, “be heavy,” in the sense of “give weight to,” as in not to treat someone too lightly. The commandment calls for treating parents with appropriate seriousness. The commandment addressed the “sandwich generation” telling the grownups to give weight to the concerns of the children and telling the grown children to give weight to the concerns of their seniors.

Thus, the fifth commandment is not about whether we live in nuclear or extended families, but about the struggle between the generations. Older generations can get too attached to “the way things used to be,” and younger generations too attached to the notion that nothing important happened until they came along. The commandment calls both older and younger generations to treat one other with a seriousness that allows for freedom and response.

In calling the nuclear family “a mistake,” Brooks is highlighting what resources are lost to those smaller units by not living in extended family configurations. He suggests looking for creative ways to reclaim such resources.

We know that not every extended family should remain together and that some can be quite toxic. In fact, elsewhere Exodus refers to that very thing: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Exodus 34:6-7, emphasis added).

While initially we may hear that as a harsh judgment, it just states a reality. Four generations often lived together in one clan. Thus, toxic sin in one generation would negatively affect all who are living together, even to the third and fourth generations. But assuming poisonous sin is not present, extended families can bring a resilience and a socializing force to the combined unit.

The church is like an extended family, with many generations worshiping and working together toward a common goal. The fifth commandment provides a way to tap into the resources of the extended family, even if we do not live under the same roof: Honor one another. Value one another. Take one another seriously. Do not take each other too lightly. Allow appropriate freedom and room to grow. The fifth commandment gives us a place to start, and reminds us that with this way of life, “it may go well with you.”

**Source:** Brooks, David. “The nuclear family was a mistake.” The Atlantic, February 10, 2020,

www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2020/03/the-nuclear-family-was-a-mistake/605536/.

Retrieved March 23, 2020.

**Generations Together**

World Communion Sunday, October 4, 2020 Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

“Americans have less family than ever before.” So claims David Brooks, commentator on PBS NewsHour, Meet the Press, and elsewhere. Brooks made that statement in an article titled, “The Nuclear Family was a Mistake.” That’s right: a mistake? This may sound surprising, since most of us were raised to think of the nuclear family — a married couple with 2.5. kids — as the ideal. Brooks writes, “We take [that] as the norm, even though this wasn’t the way most humans lived during the tens of thousands of years before 1950, and it isn’t the way most humans have lived during the 55 years since 1965.”

For millennia people lived in clans or extended families, with all the support and benefits those clusters provided. But, as Brooks explains, the opening of factories in big American cities in the late 19th and early 20th centuries encouraged young adults to leave their families to chase the American dream. Alone in the city, they married early, and with their spouse and children, became families on their own: nuclear families, separated by distance from their extended families of origin.

Brooks notes that for a time, specifically between 1950 and 1965, the nuclear family configuration worked. “From 1950 to 1965, divorce rates dropped, fertility rates rose, and the American nuclear family seemed to be in wonderful shape,” writes Brooks. “And most people seemed prosperous and happy. In these years, a kind of cult formed around this type of... ‘togetherness’....” Thus, the assumption that healthy people lived in two-parent families.

According to Brooks, this fifteen-year period is the only time that the nuclear family pattern worked because conditions in society supported this design. For example, most women stayed at home, men earned enough with one income to provide for the family, and nuclear families formed close ties with other nuclear families creating “extended families” of a sort.