Full house: Breaking a reproductive taboo

by Amy Laura Hall in the February 10, 2004 issue

Though no cinematic masterpiece, *Cheaper by the Dozen* is not predictable Hollywood schlock. It is unpredictable Hollywood schlock. Loosely based on the 1948 memoir about two "efficiency experts" and their joyfully haphazard family of 12, *Cheaper* stretches "family" beyond the usual sentimental formulas of carefully controlled parenthood.

When Tom Baker lands his dream job as a big-time football coach and the family moves from relative rural obscurity into a tony suburb, their respectable midwestern neighbors are disturbed. The Baker family is a "throwback," "irresponsible," "unbelievable," and the kids are likely to "end up with their faces on milk cartons." This humor has an edge.

The delightful 1948 book by Frank and Ernestine Carey Gilbreth (two of the 12 children) narrates the interplay between their parents, Frank Gilbreth, a world-renowned engineer, and Lillian Gilbreth, an equally successful industrial psychologist. These two—who are known for bringing humming order to any factory—take delight in the disruption that their 12 children bring to their lives, and the incongruity lends charm to the story.

The politics of family planning are different today, as the film critics have noted. Catherine Graham of the *Santa Cruz Sentinel* says the appeal of Steve Martin and Bonnie Hunt as movie parents "can't make the audience suspend disbelief and go along with the central premise: that a modern, educated, middle-class couple without apparent affiliations to the Mormon or Catholic churches find themselves living with 12 offspring." Ben Goldstein of *Maxim* is even more blunt: "All in all, it's a solid family comedy with a very important . . . message: always, *always* use condoms."

Aye, there's the rub. What educated, middle-class parents in their right minds would dare have 12 children? How could they do something so "irresponsible" or

“unbelievable”? Indeed. This film is useful because, in asking such questions, supposedly open-minded viewers will find themselves uncomfortably aligned with the Baker’s uptight, ungracious neighbors. When the vegetarian mom next door notes the crumpled McDonald’s wrappers strewn on the dash of the Baker van, she groans, “Oh, they are fast food people!” I was not sure whether to laugh or to wince. After the same well-coiffed neighbor explains to her only son that she and his father opted to have one “perfect” child, I began to suspect the screenwriters of mischief.

In our era of meticulously calibrated reproduction, the Baker family breaks a taboo. My own beloved *United Methodist Book of Resolutions*, for example, calls properly educated, middle-class Protestants to employ today’s scientific means of well-timed begetting as an integral part of “responsible parenthood.” As the Gilbreth story of 1948 becomes the Baker story of 2003, the teeming brood challenges our conceptions of proper domesticity.

In a memorable scene from the original memoir, Lillian Gilbreth makes the acquaintance of a visiting representative from “a national birth control organization.” As a practical joke, a friend of Lillian’s has told the unwitting representative, Mrs. Mebane, that Lillian would be the perfect local spokeswoman for family planning. Lillian surprises Mrs. Mebane by revealing that the friend has eight children. “How perfectly frightful!” Mrs. Mebane exclaims, “She impressed me as quite normal. Not at all like an eight-child woman.” Then Frank Gilbreth summons all 12 of their children to appear, and Mrs. Mebane cries out, “Shame on you! And within 18 miles of national headquarters.” Presumably, in 1948 readers laughed at Mrs. Mebane. Today, Mrs. Mebane has effectively won.

The history behind this shift in mainline Protestantism (and in the “educated middle-class”) is complicated. Many of the original, mid-century arguments had to do with thinly veiled eugenic ideas about quality over quantity. (Christine Rosen’s new book *Preaching Eugenics*: *Religious Leaders and the American Eugenics Movement* details mainline Protestant participation in eugenics.) Today’s Protestant documents often appeal to a particular understanding of ecological stewardship, encouraging parents to limit their children in order to preserve God’s creation. *Cheaper by the Dozen* implicitly asks its viewers to question both of these arguments. For example, the supposedly “one perfect” child next door is quite the awkward geek, and his supposedly earth-friendly mother spends more on his one birthday party than the Baker family probably spends on all 12.

However, *Cheaper* focuses our attention elsewhere. The real villain of the film is not the yuppie-granola neighbor but Tom Baker's supervisor—"the wiener," as the youngest twins call him. Personifying the dubious norms of today's corporate world, the boss repeatedly questions Tom's professional commitment and even his manhood for allowing his children to interrupt his work, telling Tom "Hey! This is your moment, not theirs!"

Cheaper thus prompts viewers to suspect that the actual culprit in the story of downsized families and downsized family life is the truly unlivable workplace. Tempted by the allure of a career more important than fatherhood, Tom's choices reverberate through the household. Their home life is akin to a well-worn car that shakes when it goes over 60 mph, and the elder children eventually call their father to task. When the oldest son insists, "Go ahead and look out for number one, but don't feed us that crap about being a happier and stronger family!" we are to ask some self-searching questions about our own—well, crappy capitulation.

The screenwriters deserve a medal in their choice of a denouement. Rather than putting the key decision on Kate Baker, as she juggles her new work as a writer and mother, they set it in Tom's lap. Tom takes a seemingly foolhardy leap off the fast track in order to keep his commitments as a daddy. The scene where he leaves "the wiener" is no less memorable than the "Let's Go Fly a Kite" scene in Mary Poppins. His boss concludes, "So, you are giving up on the dream." Tom replies, "If I screw up raising my kids, nothing else I do will matter."

This less than perfect comedy may prompt a serious and overdue conversation about reproduction among Christians whose ecclesial bodies encourage orderly procreation. *By whose rules are we playing*? In our unmitigated efforts to reproduce "responsibly," are we submitting to a culture increasingly intent on precluding the interruption of children? As we tell ourselves that our families are happier and stronger due to our diminished family size and newly enabled focus on careers, are we at least in part accommodating an economy conspicuously inhospitable to new life?

Noting the shift from the assumptions at play in the 1948 book to the culturally jarring version of 2003, we may come to view the Baker family as an oversized canary in a mineshaft. Ultimately, what will become of a society that advises its aspiring professionals to "always, *always* use a condom"?