

We're still family

by [Jason Byassee](#) in the [February 20, 2013](#) issue



I avoided *Modern Family* for as long as I could. I've never had a taste for family sitcoms. Maybe it's bad memories of people my grandparents' age trying to get me to laugh at Archie Bunker or the awful laugh track that accompanied even good programs like *The Cosby Show*.

The premise of *Modern Family* seems flimsy. It's set up as a European reality show filming three branches of the Pritchett family. Jay, the patriarch, is married to the beautiful (and much younger) Gloria, his second wife, who has a sexy Colombian accent. Jay's daughter Claire is married to the impossibly doofus-like Phil Dunphy, whose efforts to be cool embarrass the viewer as well as his three children ("I know all the text message abbreviations: LOL, laugh out loud; WTF, why the face"). Jay's gay son Mitch has adopted a Vietnamese baby with his partner, Cam. The macho Jay has to adjust to having a gay son and a Hispanic stepson, while his beautiful daughter compares herself to her even more beautiful stepmother. The show covers this territory with laser-fast dialogue, and each episode ends with everybody hugging and realizing the value of family without the whole thing dissolving entirely into schmaltz.

In an early episode, Phil and Claire's youngest child, Luke, shoots a sibling with his new BB gun. According to a bizarre family rule, he has to be shot in return (hilariously, the wisdom of the rule is never questioned). But the Dunphy family can't find a time to schedule this retribution. They gather around the calendar, and each member scratches off dates due to conflicts. They settle on a Monday at 3:45. The situation is preposterous, but as for the scheduling dilemma, who hasn't been there?

In another early episode, Cam and Mitch are on the return flight from Vietnam with their adopted child when a couple boarding the plane points to the beautiful little girl "with the two cream puffs." Mitch had already been threatening to "give the speech," and with this antigay slur he can't contain himself. He leaps into the aisle and grabs the passengers' attention: "Love knows no creed, no barrier of any kind." Cam begs him to stop: baby Lillian was, indeed, holding two cream puffs that he'd brought on board as a snack. The show manages to display the indignity that gay couples sometimes face while poking fun at the human propensity for righteous indignation.

One difference between *Modern Family* and iconic family shows of yore is its frankness about sex. But the show manages to be endearing on the topic. In one episode the Dunphy children barge into their parents' bedroom the morning of their anniversary to surprise them with breakfast in bed. Catching their parents in the act, the children flee horrified from the scene, but then they discuss it and realize that most of their friends' parents are divorced. At least their parents still like each other. So they return home, dreading the talk they know they are going to get. Because their parents grew up in a household that avoided discussing things, "they have to talk to us about everything. Remember when we had a family meeting because we switched to 1 percent milk?" The children conspire to smile and nod happily at their parents' birds-and-bees speech, leaving Claire and Phil high-fiving at "how well we handled that."

While religion doesn't get the same frank treatment on the show as sex, it isn't avoided either. When Gloria berates Jay for choosing the golf course over church on Sunday, he protests that he can experience God in nature just as well as in church. Then an earthquake hits. Jay teases Gloria for being superstitious and insists he'd need a much clearer sign than a natural disaster that God wants him in church. "If God had a problem with me, he would let me know. And he would be a little more specific" than shaking the entire city. Then Jay backs out of his driveway and runs over his golf clubs. The episode shows both the appeal and the flimsiness of Jay's

preference for golf over church.

Jay goes on to convince his stepson Manny to skip church with him. “Probably going to have a Latino kid carry my clubs anyway, might as well be you.” Manny probes Jay further about faith.

“You’re not worried about hell?”

“Let me let you in on a little secret, kid: there is no hell.”

“Seriously? No hell? That’s fantastic! So everyone just goes to heaven?”

“Yep. End of story.”

“Even bad people?”

“Yeah, they’re in another section. . . . They’re walled in.”

“What if they break out?”

“They’re surrounded by a lake of fire.”

“This is turning into hell.”

“It was just a hunch.”

“I’m skipping church based on a hunch? You’re playing pretty fast and loose with my soul.”

In the same episode, Claire is accidentally locked into a bathroom with the plumber when the earthquake hits and the house shifts. Phil, instead of working to free them, works feverishly at trying to anchor a cabinet to the wall. Why? Because he’d led Claire to believe he’d attached it long before, and he doesn’t want to reveal he had lied. Which of us wouldn’t be inclined to do the same—put saving the appearance of being right over doing the right thing? “Like they say, sometimes when God closes a door, he closes it so hard your wife can’t get out.”

*Modern Family* catches the way family can be both loathsome and life-giving, and how family members can do awful things to one another and still collapse into their need for one another.