

3 Pentecost Mark 3:20-35
Christ and Grace June 10, 2018
Robin Teasley

This past week, someone I didn't know called the church office to ask me where in the Bible it says that living together before marriage is a sin, and where the Episcopal Church stands on this issue. It was clear to me that something was going on in her family that was causing no small amount of conflict. We had a good conversation and I won't elaborate on it now, but it's one example of the general anxiety that is increasing everywhere due to all that is going on in our society that is destructive, that is causing fear, that is not life-giving but life-taking. It's the age-old question, "What is this world coming to?" When things are not going well, it's human nature to find someone or something to blame. Often the problems of society find their scapegoat in the presumed crumbling of family values. And Christians will often refer to scripture to support their stance on family values.

But if we look more closely, there is much in scripture that reveals a huge amount of family dysfunction! These stories are not usually the ones included in our lectionary, so you may not be familiar with them. But even those that *are* included, show us that families are far from perfect. Cain and Abel competed in sibling rivalry until Cain, in his jealousy and anger, killed his brother. Abraham pretended his wife Sarah was his sister in order to save his own skin. Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of soup. Jacob tricked his father and his father-in-law. Joseph's jealous brothers sold him to passing Ishmaelite traders. And this is only what happens in Genesis!

But it's in today's Gospel where we see family dysfunction that is really disturbing. And it's disturbing to us because the dysfunction is in Jesus' own earthly family and even Jesus appears to be behaving badly!

As is typical in Mark's Gospel, life has been clipping along at a fast pace. We are only in chapter three and Jesus has been casting out demons right and left, healing the sick, and appointing the twelve apostles. Jesus is becoming famous (or is it infamous?) and the crowd is so insistent and so pressing that he and the disciples could not even eat. On top of that the scribes have caught up with Jesus and are accusing him of being in cahoots with Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. Jesus was tired, hungry, and in need of some "alone" time! And then, his family shows up to *restrain* him. The scripture here is polite. The word restrain would be more accurately translated as "seized, grabbed, or arrested." Jesus' family was getting into his business! They had come to haul him back home, to save him from harm, or to save their family pride.

The truth is, the family thought Jesus was crazy! They had heard the people saying he was out of his mind, so they showed up at the door to restrain him, probably as much out of their own embarrassment as for Jesus' sake. Don't you know his family was saying, "What is the *matter* with him? We raised him better than that!" You see, family was everything in that culture at that time. Who you were, what you did, when you married, and how you behaved; your entire relationship to God and to society was defined by your family.

And in that moment, Jesus redefined for all time the meaning of family. Even so, it's important to note that Jesus is not rejecting the institution of family or his own family. What he does is open up the meaning of family. Jesus expands and re-frames the idea of family. Now it no longer matters who our ancestors are, what our past looks like, or how many ways we have messed up. We are called to look beyond our image of family as only the one into which we were born, to see the gift we have been given of growing in faith and love alongside our brothers and sisters in Christ. The truth is, families can be messy and humanity is in need of a Savior.

When Jesus looked around that day at the crowd of misfits, mistaken scribes, the unclean on the margins, the disciples, and even his own family, he proclaimed that true family is made up of those who do the will of God. Jesus knew from his human experience that families are *not* perfect. That there will be times when they are out of their minds, or drive us out of ours! My friend Shelby shared a quote with me from her wise grandmother, a quote that was stamped on the back of their family reunion tee shirts one year – Thank God for your family – and thank God you can choose your friends!

The wisdom in this quote lies in the fact that our families are a given, and sometimes they can be less than functional. But we can choose to become part of a larger family, the family of God. We need both our family and our church. Our faith community can love us in ways our family cannot. They can more easily put up with our bad habits and eccentricities. And they can sometimes more objectively and gently help us to examine our behaviors that may be harmful to others.

It's not easy and it's not perfect, but the Church provides a network of support to help us deal with life's dysfunctions. When there is conflict in our biological family, our larger church family is there to hold us in love and offer guidance. to help us hear things we may be unable to hear from our own parents, children, or siblings. Being loved and accepted for who we are in our church family strengthens and encourages us to be more forgiving and accepting of our own families. It helps us recognize the all-encompassing love of God.

The Bible is full of stories of bad parenting, wayward children and sibling rivalry; stories of sin and reconciliation; stories of pain and loss followed by grace and redemption. Families never were and never will be perfect. This story about Jesus and his family is a gift to us. It shows us Jesus in his full humanity and in his full divinity, teaching us that family is so much more than we realized. Jesus' family is an open family and all who do the will of God are invited to the table. It's like a big family reunion where all who are overwhelmed and imperfect are accepted and loved by a Savior who understands every one of us.

Thank God for family, and thank God for the family of God!

Amen.