Family Ties
Mark 3:20-35
Sunday, June 6, 2021

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*Jesus ignores his family’s request to see him, and reminds us that the family of God is broader than we imagine.*

“Who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?”

Jesus’ words ricochet around the crowd and out through the house. His mother and family stand near the windows. Mark does not tell us how they responded, but your guess is as good as mine. The others who stand near his mother lower their heads. Looking at the ground they murmur to each other, “Look at how he treats his family.” Others, even more incensed, cried out “Blasphemy!”

Jesus’ words are direct, clear, and astonishing.

Imagine Mary: she just wants to see her son. The child whom she had cradled, the boy she had protected, the man she still worried over. We can joke about Mary trying to scold Jesus – you never call, you never visit, you never write – but the truth of the matter is that these words hurt more than she can say.

These verses form a sort of sandwich: the middle layers of meat and cheese include Jesus’ confrontation with the religious leaders surrounded by the bread about Jesus’ family.

Imagine that harshness. They are surprising, confusing. Maybe even offensive.

After all, following our more than year-long distancing from many of our families, Americans are ready to hit the road this summer. Millions of Americans celebrated Memorial Day by dropping the masks and meeting with family. Nationwide, about s[ix million people passed through airports](https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/05/30/memorial-day-weekend-travel-pandemic/), with the largest airports reporting the highest daily passenger numbers for 2021. Overall, travel over 50 miles from home is predicted to be up more than 60 percent from 2020.

We yearn to reunite with family. Of course, after a year of no haircuts or DIY hair coloring, some family members may barely resemble their pre-pandemic selves. Our reunions may begin by paraphrasing Jesus’ words from Mark: “Who are my mother and my brothers?”

The dangers of coronavirus have not yet fully passed, of course, and there are many families for whom reunions are more painful than comforting. But reading Mark’s retelling of Jesus’ encounter with his family may leave us wondering. “Whoever does God’s will is my brother, sister, and mother,” says Jesus. This is not the sort of “family values” we have come to associate with Jesus.

Jesus’ rebuke of his family makes little sense. What is to be gained by distancing himself from his mother and siblings?

At first, it appears that Jesus’ family members longed to find him. They were not interested in sharing potato salad and barbecue, of course. They were not interested in trading stories about times gone by but were instead afraid for his well-being. Mary and his brothers are concerned that Jesus is losing his mind. As one interpreter says, it appears as though Jesus’ family is preparing to stage an intervention.

This is the first time Mark mentions Jesus’ family, and by all accounts they are worried sick about him. The only things they have heard about him have been bad. Word has reached them that he spent more than a month in isolation in the wilderness, and then started healing on the Sabbath. Everywhere he has been the people have been shaking, asking themselves, “What is this?”

Word travels fast in small towns, and Mary has heard all of it. The demons. Eating with sinners. Ignoring the fast, challenging the authorities. And crowds everywhere. And even now it is impossible for him to eat.

Having heard all these things about him, his family decides he’s out of his mind, and he needs to be corralled before someone gets hurt.

It’s the sort of things families do.

Earlier this spring I attended a conference on anxiety in families that featured Dr. Kathleen Smith, author of the book “Everything Isn’t Terrible.” I think that Dr. Smith speaks for many of us when she says:

To be human is to feel that you are not enough. I can’t think of a better word to describe my anxiety. Am I giving my daughter enough attention?  Was that email I sent nice enough, or not clear enough? Am I eating healthy enough to live long enough? Am I doing enough to help keep this country from careening further into chaos? Who knows?

The anxiety of not being “enough” can emerge when you lack a solid, realistic definition about who you’re trying to be as a human on this planet. Because when you don’t have one, you tend to evaluate yourself based on how you feel at any given moment. So if you feel like a bad mother, you must be one. If you feel unqualified for the job, this must be true. This is exactly why feeling incompetent can sometimes get you into more trouble than being incompetent.

Because the Internet knows I have a kid, articles about “mommy guilt” are constantly popping up on my social media feed. “Look!” they shout. “Even famous people have mom guilt!” While it can feel nice to have your anxiety normalized, the truth is that these emotions do impact your functioning and your relationships. If you had a parent who felt “less than” in some way, chances are you can recall the contagiousness of their anxiety.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Like any good mom, maybe Mary was struggling with mommy guilt.

But don’t let Jesus’ words fool you. The Gospel of Mark is not a story about rekindling fond memories of Jesus’ familial bonds. Mark pays sparse attention to Jesus’ background (see “The Gospel of Mark,” by Donald Juel, 1999). Mark skips the supernatural aspects of the incarnation and birth, replacing them with what scholar Donald Juel calls an emphasis on Jesus’ ordinariness.

It is precisely this ordinariness that causes him trouble, and results in his family’s concern for his mental status. They have heard he is out of his mind, that he’s been accused of being Beezebul (“Lord of the flies”), or that he’s possessed.

Jesus, however, sees things differently. For him this is a time to cut the apron strings. He is intent on remaining focused on doing the work of proclaiming the kingdom, and in this case that includes a radical reorientation of the meaning of family. **Doing the will of God is what ultimately matters.**

He looks at those gathered around the table – the outcasts, the sinners seeking forgiveness, the possessed seeking wholeness, the ill seeking healing. These are the ones who are seeking God’s presence.

Jesus is not shaming his mother, his brothers, his sisters. Instead, he is pointing out what really matters: demonstrating the presence of God that has broken loose in the world.

His family now broadens to include those who are engaged in that work. It includes those who have previously been excluded and ignored: the sinners, the demon possessed, the marginalized. God’s power reverses the status of those the world has shunned, and brings healing to those held captive by the powers of evil. Jesus has entered into the house of the Lord of the Flies and he has been busy getting it cleaned up.

And this is Good News. It is good news, indeed, especially to those who have been abandoned by their families: the unclean, the lepers, tax collectors and others. The only reunion Jesus is headed to is the banquet table of the reign of God where all shall feast, and where family relationships have been sorted out in new ways.

It is good news to those in the world today who have been isolated or disconnected from their families. It is good news to those whose hearts have been crushed, to those who are alone, and to those who long for the welcoming grace of unconditional love.

These are the siblings of Jesus—the ones who are doing the work of God. The implication is that these are the ones disciples should name as family, especially in a moment when the understanding of family is undergoing change.

Who is our family, our siblings in this new phase of the pandemic? Look around. Look at those who are eager to hear the news that Jesus brings grace to those who are filled with anxiety and worry. Look around at those who are scared because they have internalized messages of hatred and self-loathing. Look around at youth who wrestle with questions of identity and purpose, who are aware they do not fit into the neat categories prescribed by the world.

In this summer of reuniting, let us as God’s people, as the ones who seek to do the will of God, express the love and grace of God by embracing the very persons Jesus included. Let us draw on our experiences of discovering the embrace of the God who welcomes – and let us begin to hear the calling to become family.

We sometimes call ourselves the closet of broken toys, but I think Jesus would say, “You’re family.” Amen.

1. See https://kathleensmith.net/2020/03/04/the-anxiety-of-enough/#more-1771 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)