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Mark 3:19b-35

## FAMILY AFFAIR

If you ever felt that your family never really understood you, well you can take some comfort in knowing Jesus experienced something similar with his family. If your family members ever embarrassed you in public, know that Jesus' family did the same to him. If your family members actively opposed you and your choices in life, know that Jesus' family did likewise.

Mark's gospel does not give us a very flattering picture of Jesus' family. The other gospels, Matthew, Luke, and John, give us a more sympathetic image of Jesus' mother, father, and siblings. But not here in Mark. It is evident from the passage we read today that Jesus' family members have not become supporters of his ministry and instead they actually oppose him. In our reading today, they have come to do an intervention because it appears to them that Jesus is not stable in his mind. His exorcisms of demons, his unconventional preaching, his association with sinners and socially unacceptable people, and those conflicts he kept getting into with the religious leaders all served to convince Jesus' family that he was not well and needed to be stopped. After all, his own family had much to lose if Jesus should provoke those in power. And so his family shows up to try to take Jesus away.

But the crowds around Jesus are so thick his family can't reach him and so they have to pass word through the crowd that they want to see him. Imagine how embarrassing that might have been, to have word passed through the crowd to you that your family thinks you're mentally unhinged and has come to take you away!

Jesus does not appear to meet with them. Instead he utters some words that shocked his listeners back then and which unsettle us sitting here all these centuries later. Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers? . . . Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus' words regarding the family would have been revolutionary. In the ancient world, kinship was everything to a person. The extended family structure was essential for social and economic wellbeing and it determined one's vocation, one's social status, one's security in old age. It was the backbone of society. But here it sounds like Jesus is undermining the most central and important institution of society.

Families are still promoted today as a central and important institution in society. And the function of the family in society is indeed significant. We can see how people suffer when families are not strong, when parents don't fulfill their responsibilities and are absent in their children's lives, or when family members abuse one another. We know that families can provide emotional, social, and economic stability in people's lives. Some of us here today know the joy and blessing that can come from loving families and the meaningful relationships that were formed in the family.

But we also know that families are not perfect. Families are made up of people, and people are broken and imperfect. There are lots of ways that your kin can really mess you up. There are many among us who carry scars from families that were very flawed. So while the family can be a meaningful institution, it is only as healthy and only as meaningful as the people who make it up. And it is far from a perfect institution.

Periodically, usually in election years, politicians will rally to defend the family against all manner of perceived dangers. The family is lifted up as society's highest good. There is almost no higher praise in our society than when we declare that a person put "family first."

But Jesus did not see the family as society's highest good. Jesus saw God as society's highest good. Here is the thing about Jesus: he criticized anything that distorted our relationship with God, that distorted our allegiance to the only one who should claim our devotion. And sometimes, sometimes family is one of those distortions.

Former Methodist bishop, William Willimon, reflects that, "There was a day when Christmas greeting cards routinely displayed pictures of the baby Jesus in the manger with Joseph and Mary standing close by. Now, our Christmas cards feature OUR smiling families on the slopes of Vail. The family has become the center of our adulation, the most important of all human gatherings."

This elevation of the family unit is a distortion of our allegiances. The family is not the institution to which we owe ultimate allegiance. God is the one who should receive our ultimate allegiance. The family is indeed a very important place where we can live out and embody God's love and grace, but it is not the source of our ultimate meaning and purpose in life.

Thus, Jesus did not embrace the "family first" mentality of which we think so highly. "Family first" narrows the circle of belonging. Instead, Jesus sought to expand the boundary lines of belonging based not on blood lines but upon lines of devotion to the way of God. This was a radical idea in his era when biological kinship meant everything. Who is my mother, who is my brother, Jesus asks. Whoever does the will of God. Jesus creates new kinship ties with a wide and often astonishing assortment of people. Jesus reaches out and brings into the family

outcasts and women, the poor and disabled, prostitutes and sinners. The doors are open to anyone and everyone to join this family, this new community of belonging.

The Sacrament of Baptism celebrates this new family. In a short while we will celebrate this sacrament as we baptize Henry Safulko. And as we do so, each one of us is invited to recall that we also are baptized into a new family, into the household of God. We are all adopted into God's family. And in the most loving way possible, we remind Henry's parents who will stand up here with their young son, that their family is not sufficient in itself. There is a bigger family to which their child belongs. There is a bigger family to which we all belong. And I don't just mean our congregation or our denomination. The institution of the Church is just as flawed and capable of injury and wrong doing as is the institution of the family. The family to which we belong is much bigger than any one congregation or denomination. It is the household of God, the family of believers, past and present, who seek to live out the love of God in their lives.

Rather than tearing down the family, Jesus creates family wherever he goes, joining us to one another in new bonds of kinship. When Jesus hangs dying on the cross he sees his mother standing beside one of his disciples. And Jesus says to her, "Woman, here is your son." And to the disciple, "Here is your mother." A new family is created.

There are those people in our society who want to keep the definitions of family narrow. They want to define what constitutes a "legitimate" family and to penalize those groupings that don't fit their idea of family. And family becomes something they must defend and create barriers around. Jesus tore down the barriers, inviting in a whole bunch of people no one thought belonged.

There are tendencies within all of us to care about "family first" and thus to push all others to the periphery of our attention or concern. But Jesus offers us a new challenge: to make

our primary allegiance to the God of love. And when we do that, our understanding of family will naturally be broad and wide.

When it comes down to it, family is about finding our place of belonging. And when we make our place of belonging in the love of God, why then, we will understand how everyone is included in that family. In Henry's baptism, we are reminded that all of us have been claimed by the God of love who says to us: "you belong."