

June 6, 2021  
Mark 3:20-35  
Pentecost 2  
Traditional

If I asked you today to define family, what would you say? Hold onto those words for just a bit, because in Mark today, we meet Jesus' family – his mother and brother, and those he redefines as family.

Since his baptism, Jesus has been busily preaching the good news of God's kingdom all over Galilee, and calling the first disciples to follow him, and healing a great many people. Word's getting around, so perhaps it's not surprising that when his family turns up to see him one day, they find a crowd. They've come to find him because they're worried about him. And for good reason – people are saying all kinds of things about him. He's become famous, sure, kind of a first-century rock star, but as we all know rock stars can go over the edge, and it may very well seem to Jesus' family like that's just what's happening. Moreover, the religious authorities are pretty upset by what Jesus is doing and saying, and typically you don't want to mess with the authorities. So for all these reasons and more, Jesus' family comes to get him, to help him, maybe to bring him home before things go really wrong.

Problem is, Mom and brothers can't even get into the house easily there are so many people there; instead, they send word to Jesus *through* the crowd that they have arrived. The picture is rather telling: They are on the perimeter, outside looking in. That's a good indicator of what was really going on: Partly due to physical distance, partly due to a constellation of spiritual misunderstanding and barricades, His family has misread and misunderstood His radical service to His Father. They are on the outside, unaware of His purposes and program, so they are willing, on the basis of their unaided, unrenewed human thinking, to intervene and thwart what is in reality the purpose of God!

As I read this text again this week, I thought back on all the sermons I've heard over the years about Jesus dissing his family here: ignoring, dismissing, or outright rejecting them. Whether preachers highlight this (see how much more important his mission was even than his family), or lament it (can't his mom have even a minute of his time?); either way, the assumption seems to be that in identifying others gathered around *as* family, Jesus entirely discounted his nuclear family.

Problem is, there's a gap in the narrative here. It would help if Mark answered our burning question: did Jesus invite his mother and brothers into the house or not,

after making this statement about all those other folks being his family? Because surely if anyone had a right to cut in line to see this famous Jesus of Nazareth it should be the woman who carried and swaddled and fed the boy!

But notice, the text doesn't actually say he dismissed his mother and brothers without letting them in to say hello. It leaves that detail out entirely. Which leads me to think this wasn't the point Mark was trying to make.

I read the story as an example of Jesus using every object lesson at his disposal to convey what the kingdom of God is like. He'd be walking along and see a farmer sowing seed, or a fisherman casting a net, or a woman baking bread, and right on the spot he'd come up with these little lessons for his disciples. To what can I compare the kingdom of God? It's like the seeds that farmer is scattering... it's like that net bursting with fish... it's like the yeast in that bread.

What if that's all that's happening here too? Jesus is already teaching about God's kingdom, and someone gets word to him through the crowd that his mom and brothers have just arrived. Why *wouldn't* he seize the opportunity to teach them yet another significant truth about the kingdom of God? Why *not* say: "See my

mother? See my brothers? You too are my mother and my brothers and sisters, if you stick close to God and try to do his will; we're all one family in God's eyes." I don't think we need to conclude he dismissed his own family members. He may simply have wanted to make clear that "family" is something far bigger than the nuclear unit of the "Josephsons", if you will, from Nazareth.

We certainly like to invoke that broader definition of family around here. I can't tell you the number of times, when I invite church members to describe this congregation to newcomers, that the word "family" comes up. Naturally we value our own smaller family units too. But I'm so pleased that the children of this church know you all are part of their extended family, and I know how much you enjoy having them as part of yours. Our St. John's<sup>2</sup> family includes friendships many decades long, and brotherhoods and sisterhoods that have begun quite recently but are no less meaningful for their newness. We celebrate regularly the tremendous gift it is to broaden the term "family" to include our whole congregation, not just those in our respective households, or those with whom we shared Christmas dinner this year.

But let's return to your word associations you shared at the beginning. When you speak of family, you use words

like:

*Unconditional love*

*Support*

*Grace*

*Responsibility*

*Unity*

*Mentoring*

*and 'tree,' as in those wonderful intergenerational connections through the years in a family tree, which we have here in a sense at church as well*

Dr. John, through these last twelve years of ministry with us here at St. John's you have become an important part of this family of faith. You have, time and again, brought us to the throne of God through your powerful offerings of music. You have taught us well, how to lift our voices in praise to the one who is head of this household, and you have even allowed yourself to be taught new ways of worship. You have used the Liturgy and the lessons to guide your selections of music, and have deepened and enriched our worship experience as you steeped yourself in God's Word. Through your music, You have drawn forth excellence from those who sang under your expert direction, have welcomed many a newcomer, and through your music, you have gently led so many on their final journey to their eternal home. You have become

family to us, and now, are moving on to retirement and doing whatever the Lord calls forth from you next. How can we argue with that? The whole point of family is not just roots, but wings.

Returning to our text, in the absence of evidence one way or the other, I suppose we could argue all day about whether or not Jesus invited his mom and his brothers into the house at the end of this episode in Mark 3, and spent time catching up with them. I'd like to think he did. What does seem clear is that as a lover of object lessons, Jesus seized upon a teachable moment to say something about the breadth and width of God's family. That family visit provided a perfect opportunity to tell those crowding around him – including, no doubt, many who were hungry and poor, many with diseased bodies or broken bones or broken spirits who wouldn't be welcomed into other families – that they were *absolutely* included in the family of God.

Meanwhile, I guess I want to give Jesus some credit for respecting his mama. And while we're at it, I want to give his mama far more credit than she's given in some interpretations too. Who are we to assume she was disappointed in Jesus' remark here? After all, some of us heard Mary's own words here during Advent, that amazing song she sang in Luke 1 when she'd just learned

she was carrying the Son of God. The angel Gabriel told her nothing was impossible for God, and what did she sing about in response? She sang about God reversing completely the way humans tend to value one another. No longer will the rich and powerful have it made, she sang. Instead, God is busy lifting up the lowly, and filling the hungry with good things. I wonder if her song became a family favorite. If so, what a beautiful vision of God's kingdom this eloquent prophet may have taught her young son Jesus as he grew.

Even if Mary found it hard at times to share her remarkable boy with the crowds that followed him, I like to believe that when she turned up for a visit and found him offering this lesson about the family of God, she recognized echoes of a song she'd been singing him since before he was born.

If Jesus through cousin John's eyes was great and powerful and holy, we have every reason to expect that Jesus through his mother Mary's eyes was her pride and joy. Throughout his ministry, she would watch him widening the circle, eliminating the margins, redefining who was welcome and included in God's family.

We don't know if Mary heard with her own ears Jesus saying his family included every hungry, broken, or

unloved person crowding around him: "here are my mother and my brothers." I suspect the crowd at least got that word back to her. And sure, it requires a bit of holy imagination to see her facial expression in that moment, or otherwise to catch her reaction, since the text doesn't record it for us.

But rather than causing her to worry Jesus didn't love *her* anymore (let's give them both more credit than that), when I think about seeing Jesus here through Mary's eyes, I imagine her smiling as he referred to all those others as family too. I even wonder if she said to herself with a bit of pride, "He remembered our song!

Dr. John, may you remember the song of this family, the song you brought, and the song which has been given to you. May you remember that this family is here to do the will of God, who draws us together and who calls us forth from this place. May His will continue to lead and guide you, and may His song be ever in your heart.