

June 06, 2021

Let us pray: May the spoken word be faithful to the written word, and glorify the living Word. Amen

“And (Jesus) replied, ‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’” Mark 3:33

In today’s gospel, Jesus has what we would call today, a PR problem. In Mark’s account of Jesus’ ministry, it is apparent that Jesus has been doing the appropriate actions ... but not, according to his fellow Jews, appropriately.

As a Jewish rabbi, Jesus should have disciples ... but not a tax collector, a sell-out to the hated Roman oppressors. It is wonderful to have a Rabbi who can heal and cast out demons ... but not on the Sabbath. The sick should seek healing on a weekday. And a good Jewish boy should know better than to allow a leper to approach him. Public opinion is so negative, his family thinks he has lost his sanity and they head out to detain him.

Modern wisdom would recommend a spin doctor; someone who takes what the public perceives negatively and puts a positive spin on it. Like when Trump’s press person, who when told that her account did not agree with the facts, said hers were ‘alternative facts’.

But Jesus does not need a spin doctor; it is we humans who do not understand that Jesus is showing us the nature and the will of God. We need to change our attitudes and our ways. Instead of following the mores of the world around us, we need to align our minds with the mind of God.

The crowds, the religious rulers, and even his own family did not understand. Today, we know Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. But in his time, he was just another itinerant Rabbi. To his family and the crowds, he is not acting in the ‘proper’ manner; to the

religious authorities, he is a threat to the established ordering of society, family, and religion.

To the Jewish people of his time, as to many people in our day, family was all important. But a family defined by a shared blood. Jesus says that real family comes not from shared blood, but from shared obedience to God.

A social worker was the guest speaker at a weekend I attended with colleagues in ministry. She spoke about the difference between the 1950's understanding of family as a husband, wife, and children, to today's, where the types of family range through blended families, chosen families, single parents, and other types.

She asked us to discuss at our tables how we understood family. At my table, one friend said family were those who were related by blood. Another (now we were all close friends) said, "But I see you as family and we are not related by blood." Into the silence, from somewhere came words, and I said, "But are we not related through the blood of Jesus?" It is through our relationship with God in Jesus Christ that the members of the church are family.

Jesus' understanding of love, his vision of God's kingdom, is rooted in a profound inclusivity that religious law and social mores frowned upon, both then and now. To Jesus, family are those who journey with us as disciples.

My daughter likes to say that our family puts the fun back in dysfunctional. We sometimes struggle to work through conflict. But whenever one member has an issue, the family gathers as one to back them and support them. This happened again this week, when we were finally able to get our furniture out of storage in Nova Scotia. My sister and my youngest niece met the movers, and organised what had to stay and what to send.

My family is both the family of my birth and the individuals joined through marriage to the birth family. My husband's parents were never my in-laws, but my Mom and Dad. I was greatly blessed by their love for, and acceptance of, me.

My parents were legal guardians to my older sister, someone who has always been very precious and close to me. She and her husband have 3 sons. When our son, Mark, was born, my former sister-in-law (and perhaps this explains why she is now former) said to me, "Your father must be so excited to have a real grandson." My extremely icy reply was, "My father already has 3 very real grandsons."

I have been greatly blessed throughout my life because my young, newly wed father opened his heart to this little 6 year old. It was this sister's invitation to come and live with them that I met my precious husband. But as a child, many parents would not allow their daughters to play with her, because her parents were divorced.

Who do we exclude for unloving reasons? What rules do we prize above inclusion? Too often our church has upheld society's judgements, beliefs, and rules, instead of Christ's. We were reminded recently, in a tragic and shameful way, that we as a church, saw indigenous people as savages, outsiders, less than human, needing to be transformed into our likeness and image. We did not see them as family to be cherished and celebrated.

Two hundred and fifteen dead children, tossed into a mass, unmarked grave, as if they were worthless. Our granddaughter was 4 last October, the age at which indigenous children were taken from their parents. What if the Mounties had come with handcuffs for our Meisha? What if we never saw her again? How this callous behaviour must have devastated those who suffered this heartbreaking injustice.

We must not - ever - subscribe to a society that labels people as insider or outsider, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable, welcomed or rejected. I wonder if Mary, hearing Jesus' words, was hurt by what could be seen as her son's rejection. Or if the

Mary who 'kept all these things in her heart and pondered them', knew her son well enough to see the joy, the wonder, and the blessing in this reordering of the understanding of family.

At a funeral, the reading was from Jesus' final teaching to his disciples at the Last Supper - I am the vine and you are the branches. When the Rector spoke on this reading, he talked about what vines do to buildings. They may look pretty but they are destructive to the building, eventually pulling it down.

So too, he said, we as branches of the vine should be living in such a way as to tear down the unjust and inhumane structures around us. It is to our shame that too often the church has supported these structures as right and godly.

Going back to my older sister. Once one of her sons asked his father, "Who is my real Papa? Papa Bill or Papa George?" Now I was thinking 'Bill' because that was her biological parent. But without hesitation, my brother-in-law replied, "Papa George, because it is love that makes real."

It was our Mom and Dad who celebrated her birthdays, bought her Christmas gifts, and provided the necessities of life, both physical and emotional. Papa Bill rarely saw her or her sons. My Mom and Dad were the ones who remembered the special occasions, and visited often.

This is not to be understood as a criticism of Bill. Bill served in London during the blitz and its horror profoundly damaged him. It is to his credit, that, unable to raise this young child by himself, he gave her to people who could. But he always refused to allow Mom and Dad to adopt her. She carried his last name. Love, like family, comes in many forms.

Perhaps because of my older sister, Jesus' definition of family works for me: family are the people who love you, who share your faith and your goals; people who are there for you when you need someone, and who allow you to be there for them.

The lesson I would like to take away from today's gospel is the real need for us, as disciples of Jesus, to understand how deeply and often unknowingly, our society influences our thinking. Without taking the time and effort to conform our thinking to God's thinking, we are prone to going on autopilot. We may need to broaden our understanding of family.

We once had a weekly praise group that met in our home. Sharing a struggle I was having with another person, I said, "I just have to keep reminding myself that she too is a child of God." Someone joked, "Yes, God's problem child!" And my response was, "No, I am God's problem child." Someone may be a problem for me but never for God. It is easy to think that someone I struggle with is also a struggle for God, but this is never true.

I once heard the story of a celebrated preacher who was congratulated on his popularity as a speaker. He replied wryfully, "Whenever I come to town, they throw a banquet. But whenever Paul came to a town, they threw riots." He understood that the Gospel, if we truly live it, will cause upheaval and dissension

We should be pushing the boundaries of what is socially and religiously acceptable in our communities in order to reach more people with the always surprising, often upsetting, unimaginably gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus.

God's is a love that overturns boundaries, wipes out divisions, and welcomes in all who need love. If we are not being criticized or even rejected on occasion because of our love in action, are we truly living out the gospel. I hate being rejected and want to be accepted. But I learned a long time ago that being accepted for a pretend me was still

rejection. It is healthier and more important to be true to who I am. But I need to know who I am before I can be faithful to myself.

Our granddaughter's other grandparents are Jewish. They share their faith with her, as we share ours. Miesha is too young to understand the difference in the two faiths, but she understands that God loves her. Recently she asked me with some anxiety, "Are you a child of God?" When I said yes, her face lit up. Child of God. That is my identity; what I need to remember, what I need to live up to.

Miesha had to ask me. But for those around me, am I living a life where others do not have to ask if I am a child of God? Can they see in my face, in my words, and in my actions that I am a child of God, a sister to Jesus?

May we all always behave in such a way as to make it clear who our Father is. Amen.