

A Day in the Life sermon series
Jesus Has Family Issues
Mark 3:20-21, 31-35
February 20, 2022

During this sermon series, we're looking at some of Jesus' more human moments, recognizing that if he was fully human, then he experienced all the joys and frustrations we do as we go throughout our day. We don't have scriptures passages about Jesus standing in long lines or getting the sniffles, but I believe he did, because he completely understands what it means to be human. Which means he knows what it's like to be part of a human family and deal with all that comes with that. As one wise person said, "You can't choose your family, but you can ignore their phone calls."

I think I have today's passage figured out. There's a logical explanation for what's going on here. Mark tells us that Jesus went home, and when he got there a crowd had already gathered. Whenever a crowd gathers for religious purposes, there's usually a potluck. So, everyone brought their covered dish and serving spoon and waited, and when Jesus and his disciples arrived, they surrounded him, clamping down upon him so much that he couldn't get to the food. He sees the cheesy broccoli casserole, he smells the corn pudding, he's already picked out the piece of pecan pie he wants, but the people are in his way, so much so Mark says Jesus "could not even eat." No wonder Jesus' family thinks he's out of his mind – the man is hungry! They should know better than to stand between a religious leader and a dessert table.

OK, so maybe that's not what is really going on here. Then what is? What is happening in this story that would lead Jesus' family to try and restrain him, and then would drive Jesus to forsake his own flesh and blood? There's a reason you don't hear this story preached a lot on Mother's Day. This is tough stuff. And it doesn't even start with what Jesus says about his family; it starts with what his family says about him.

This is one place in the Bible where I wish I knew more of the story. We know only a little about Jesus' mother Mary, and virtually nothing about his siblings. They show up in scripture only a few times, and no substantial information is given about them. But can you imagine growing up with the son of God as your brother? There's a song by the Canadian comedy group Arrogant Worms called "Jesus' Brother Bob" which gives us some insight. The song says, "I have to pay a ferry to cross the Galilee. But my brother? Oh no not him! He walks across for free." I'm sure it wasn't easy being Jesus' sibling, so there may be some jealousy at work here when they and his mother come to restrain him. But it may have been more than jealousy. They may have been genuinely afraid for Jesus. He was saying and doing things that was getting the attention of the authorities, and not in a good way. He was putting himself in danger, and by proxy putting them in danger, as well.

Not only that, but something in Jesus had changed. They'd know the man for almost 30 years, and all of a sudden, he starts healing sick people and casting out demons and preaching about God. What sane man does that? I had lunch with a minister friend of mine this past week, and he told me he knew he wanted to be a minister when he was 10 years old. And he said, "My family thought I was crazy!" Exactly! Who chooses to do this of their own free will? Our brother Jesus, the guy who shared our bunk bed and played "I Spy" on road trips, is doing what? He's gone crazy. We have to rescue him.

Not only was Jesus acting out of sorts personally, he was also violating some basic societal laws about familial responsibilities. You'll notice that there's no mention in this story of

Joseph, Jesus' father. That's because it is believed that Joseph has already died. If that's the case, then Jesus is now the oldest male in the household, and with that title comes certain obligations. If you were the oldest male, you were in charge of making sure the affairs were in order. You saw to it that there was money for food and clothing. You were the family representative; you made the decisions. What you DIDN'T do was round up twelve guys and go traipsing across the countryside playing faith healer.

In the ancient Jewish society, family came first. There was no such thing as individualism. Your first and foremost point of identity was your family. Your bloodline, your lineage, defined who you were. That's why two of our gospels provide genealogies for Jesus, tracing his roots back to Abraham and Adam and Eve. We know most families are like fudge: most sweet with a few nuts mixed in. But regardless of how much they drove you crazy, family came first.

Which is why Jesus' statement about family might sound rude to us, but would have been absolutely scandalous back then. Not only did Jesus stop being the traditional family man, he took the traditional notion of family and stood it on its head, basically redefining how we understand who our family is. No longer are we confined to DNA definitions; in the kingdom of God, family is defined by those with work alongside you to do God's will.

I'm sure these words sounded harsh to some of Jesus' listeners, even more so to his family members. It sounds as if he's cutting all ties with them. But as I read it, this isn't a statement of exclusion; it's a statement of inclusion. Anyone who does God's will is considered in kinship with us. Interestingly, this definition doesn't automatically exclude Jesus' blood relations. In fact, one of his siblings, James, will go on after Jesus' death to believe in him so much that we have a letter from James in our Bible. But in this story, Jesus' family isn't interested in serving alongside him. They want to shut him up, restrain him, keep him from his mission. And for Jesus, the mission of serving God takes priority over everything, even his own family.

Jesus is not trying to distinguish himself from his family; he is instead identifying with his followers. Remember, his disciples were asked to leave their nets, their families, their jobs, their homes, and follow him. They had already given up their family for this cause. So Jesus stands with them in solidarity, affirming that they were doing what God had called them to do, even if their families thought they were crazy.

But, as is the case, even Jesus' new family of 12 disciples aren't perfect. Jon Dominic Crossan says, "The family is society in miniature, the place where we first learn to love and be loved, hate and be hated, help and be helped, abuse and be abused." In other words, any family, whether connected through blood or spirit, carries within its framework the potential for strife and conflict. Can you imagine a Roman employee like Matthew and a religious zealot like Simon trying to get along? Anytime we try to relate to other people, there is going to be friction. Thankfully, churches are immune to such things, right? A man stranded on a desert island and was rescued by a passing boat. The boat captain looked around and said to the man, "You were able to build two huts? I'm really impressed. What's that one?" The guy said, "Oh, that's my church." "What's the other one?" The man sneered, "That's the church I used to belong to."

All congregations, including this one, are made up of people from all walks of life; people who bleed red and who bleed blue (politically and athletically), people who like chocolate and people who like vanilla; people who are pro-something and people who are anti-that-same-thing. We're still human, so just because we meet for Godly reasons doesn't mean we'll always

act Godly. We still disagree. We say mean things. We judge. We criticize. We don't always get along. Many churches are one tent away from being a full-blown circus.

And yet, Jesus says if you do the will of God, you ARE family. Paul uses a great analogy to say that all of us, this collection of eyes and ears and spleens and toenails, are woven together into one body, connected by sinew and ligament to one other, forming the family of believers. It doesn't matter what your biological family is like. It doesn't matter if you are all alone or have to go to four different dinners for Thanksgiving. It doesn't matter if you come from a loving home or a broken one. It doesn't matter if your family is estranged or just strange, whether they are right here with you in this sanctuary, 1000 miles away, are no longer with you. It doesn't matter. You are family to us.

That's one of the reasons I love baby dedications. We're not just celebrating the gift of life, we are making a covenant. Through that ritual, the congregation is saying to the parents, "We promise to adopt your child. We promise to take responsibility for their faith. We promise to support you and help you raise a Christian. We are this child's family." As this world gets bigger and scarier and more virtual than real, you need a bigger family than the one into which you were born. So we're here.

In case you're wondering, I'm NOT going to start singing the 1979 R&B smash hit single "We Are Family" by Sister Sledge, but I want to, because that's what I believe Jesus is saying. We are family, not defined by chromosomes but by whose image we bear. Our genetic and spiritual families may overlap, and when that happens, that's a beautiful thing. Jesus is not forcing us to choose between family and faith. But sometimes that choice is thrust upon us as our families harm and splinter, leaving bruises not easily healed and chasms not quickly bridged. No matter what happens, you have a family here, brought together each week to share a Sunday dinner together at a table that's been spread with a feast prepared just for you, where Jesus says to all of us, "Come and eat." We give thanks to God for our biological families, no matter how imperfect. Be sure to tell them how much you love them. And remember your spiritual genealogy. Who are my mother and father and brothers and sisters? Look around. We are family.