

Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany - January 28, 2024

Mark 3:13–35

“Being Siblings”

1. Soon after Tracy and I got married, we got our first dog, Cinnamon
 - a. Cinnamon was a very red Golden Retriever, and she was a gift from dear friends of ours who had both a male and a female Golden, whom they bred from time to time
 - b. Cinnamon was such a good girl. Smart, obedient, a great companion.
 - c. We lived in Illinois. My siblings back in Mexico knew all about Cinnamon.
 - d. I was always sharing pictures and stories about Cinnamon.
 - e. Around that time, my sister Olga told me that her middle son, Gabriel, had asked her a curious question about us when he was probably not yet in first grade.
 - i. He remembered coming to our wedding years earlier.
 - ii. “So, Tracy and Felipe got married, right? ... and then they had Cinnamon?”
 - iii. Suppressing laughter, my sister accurately answered: “Oh honey, they ADOPTED Cinnamon.” He seemed relieved by the answer.
 - f. Gabriel, who had two siblings but not a dog in his family, was grappling with understanding how our family had come to be. And he had included Cinnamon in that definition of family.
 - g. That was the Original Family, as we refer to ourselves in that time when it was just Tracy, Cinnamon and me.
 - h. That Original family would grow by virtue of adopting two daughters and two sons over the years. And along the way two more dogs as well.
 - i. What stands out to me in Gabriel’s innocent question is that his definition of family was more expansive than even that of other adults in his life.
 - j. I say that because it was annoying and stressful to us, as a young couple, to have well-meaning relatives constantly ask: “When are you going to have a family?” To which I readily and truthfully replied: “We already ARE a family!”
2. The definition of Jesus’ family is front and center in our passage today.
 - a. To be fair, it’s all a bit complicated because of his unique story and because of societal norms of the time.
 - i. As you may remember, since we started reading this gospel back in December, the book of Mark does not begin with a story of Jesus’ birth.
 1. It does talk about his family later on in the narrative.
 2. Jesus is referred to as “the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon” who also had some sisters not named. (Mark 6:3).
 3. You’ll notice there is no mention of Joseph in that verse, which over the years has led some scholars to wonder if maybe Joseph had died by the time Jesus was a grown adult (since we know about Joseph from the gospels of Matthew and Luke)
 - ii. As to societal expectations, family was the crucial, central part of a person’s identity and belonging.

1. And in the customs of the time, the interaction people had with others impacted how one's own family was perceived
 2. Think of it like a small town, like Columbus, where everybody seems to know everybody's business,
 - a. Then consider that there may be a family or a last name which may mean something very specific to people
 - b. If I said the Miller family, as in J. Irving Miller, there is a particular image which comes to mind
 - c. And if I said the last name of a person in town who is always in trouble with the law, it's likely that people in a small town will then think that the family in question is "all the same"
 3. That and more was the case in the time of Jesus: a person could bring honor or dishonor to their family by their actions.
- b. So, you might think that Jesus' family would have been super proud of what he was doing and accomplishing
- i. After all, he was healing people, he was teaching with authority, and he was drawing huge crowds!
 - ii. But, he was also drawing criticism from religious authorities. There were even scholars coming from Jerusalem and offering very harsh assessments of him (I mean, they said in our passage that he was possessed by a demon!!)
- c. It's then that we see Mary and all her children make their way to where Jesus was. And, as our translation renders the text, they were trying to restrain him.
- i. That word used in the Greek elsewhere in Mark can mean something as simple as taking someone by the hand, but it can mean something as severe as to arrest someone (as it is used to refer to the arrest of John and of Jesus)
 - ii. His family must have been very worried about what was happening!
 1. Maybe they coming to his rescue (he hadn't eaten)
 2. or they were going to protect him from himself (he's gone out of his mind!)
 3. or maybe they were feeling negative peer pressure from the community gossiping about Jesus and his work.
 - iii. No matter how we read it, I think I can safely say that there is heightened tension in the story, and his family is coming to get Jesus, to pull rank (I am your mother!) and to pull him out of this situation.
- d. Then Jesus says something which may feel like he's distancing himself from his family
- i. Who is my family? Here is my family! All who follow God are my siblings!
 - ii. Was he really saying: those people outside aren't my real family?
 - iii. That's not where I think he was aiming.
 - iv. I would argue that what's happening is that Jesus, ever the one to push boundaries, was pushing on the definitions of what being in relationship with one another meant.

- v. He was expanding the notion of family beyond the static, culturally controlled definition of family which forced people to “stay in their lane” by shaming people who dared to step outside the norm
 - vi. He was challenging not their concern for him (not even if they were misjudging him to be out of his mind),
 - 1. but he was challenging the peer pressure, the public shaming which came from having the firstborn in that family be known
 - a. for challenging the biblical scholars,
 - b. and for hanging out with crowds of people on the margins, those shamed and judged as weirdoes or worse as sinners.
3. I have heard stories here and elsewhere of when peer pressure felt so controlling
- a. Some white folk here in the States have told me stories how decades and decades ago as kids they were not able to have or bring black friends to play at home
 - b. Some of us, when we or one of our relatives came out as being Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender, there was so much pressure to keep it quiet, or worse, there was outright rejection.
 - c. Jesus gives us example after example of tearing down walls which divide us, and creating an alternative connection to one another, one which very much feels like family, a family which stands up for its members, a family flexibly willing to take others into its midst.
 - d. And Jesus does it in the context of following God. He says it plainly: Those who do the will of God are my siblings!
 - e. Part of our witness, our “walking the talk” of being Christian, is to feel and lean into the expansion of what we see as the family of God.
 - i. That can be complex, as Jesus shows us.
 - ii. There may be some very culturally rooted reasons to draw the line here or there as to who we think gets to be welcomed in.
 - iii. But Jesus shows us the way, by his teaching and his actions, that he saw those around him as siblings.
 - iv. And being welcomed felt like a new reality for many who had experienced the rejection of their original families or their hometown for a number of reasons, the validity of which Jesus rejects.
 - v. To be sure: Jesus did draw some clear lines, which may make us feel uncomfortable (like saying that all things are forgivable, except equating God to the devil -- that can't be forgiven!)
 - 1. That feels like an additional sermon – but I'll say this: I wonder if we're missing a piece of context here. Scholars are hesitant to interpret the passage, which is extremely harsh, leading some to wonder if it was it was hyperbole, an overstatement.
 - 2. But let's not miss out on the good news at the start of that problematic statement: ALL OTHER things can be forgiven
4. I am encouraged and challenged by how Jesus breaks down barriers which lead all – blood relatives, strangers, marginalized folks, rich, poor, of all political stripes, all people – to become siblings thanks to the love God has for us, and that love channeling through us.

Questions for reflection:

1. Share a story of when you felt welcomed into a family other than the one you grew up in.
2. In Mark 3:13–35, Jesus seems to dismiss his birth family, who sound concerned for him. Why do you think he responds in such a way?
3. When has church felt like family to you? When has it not?