

Sunday, June 10, 2018
Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 5 (Year B)
Mark 3.20-35
The Rev. Michael Fincher

There's an old saying. "Blood is thicker than water." The idea that relationships and loyalties within a family are stronger and more important than all others. But listening to today's Gospel reading, one might get the idea that Jesus would not have agreed with this idea.

Jesus has returned home – possibly Nazareth, maybe Capernaum – after an exhausting period of ministry. In the brief time since the start of his public ministry Jesus has already healed many people, cast out demons, and taught and preached to numerous crowds. All in a mere two chapters of Mark's Gospel. So Jesus and his newly called disciples are pretty tired and in need of some R&R. But alas, that is not to be. Jesus' notoriety has already begun to spread and people are coming from far and wide, tracking him down, to hear him speak, to have him heal their infirmities. They do not give Jesus a moment's peace.

As we hear today, Jesus is starting to get some blowback because of all this activity – all the healing and teaching and forgiving. There were those that could not comprehend Jesus' activities, or what would motivate him to do such radical things. As a result, some people are saying that Jesus is out of his mind. Scribes from the temple in Jerusalem see an even greater threat. Jesus obviously has tremendous power – the sick are healed, the blind receive their sight, cripples are able to walk, lepers are cleansed, the possessed are restored to normal life. But even more dangerous, he also presumes to forgive sins, eats with outcasts and sinners, and has even broken Sabbath laws. So they accuse him of being possessed by demons. And not just any demon, but Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. And in the midst of this, Jesus' family gets word of what is going on. And they are worried. As we are told, they "went out to restrain him." It's time for a family intervention.

But truth be told, it's not just Jesus that they are concerned about. They are more concerned with how all of this is reflecting on them. The culture that Jesus grew up in is what is known in cultural anthropology as an honor/shame culture. A society in which the primary means of controlling people, particularly children, is through shaming and the threat of ostracism. In such a culture, a child's behavior—even that of a grown child—has great consequence to the family. What one does reflects on one's family. What is perceived by some as shameful behavior on Jesus' part brings shame on his entire family. Knock it off Jesus. You're embarrassing us. There may also have been some concern about drawing unfavorable attention from religious and political authorities. Because of all this, the social standing of Jesus' family is in jeopardy. So they are on their way to intervene, to get Jesus to change his ways, to start acting more respectably. For his own safety, and for the sake of their social standing. Blood is thicker than water.

After a brief interruption, in which Jesus tells a parable illustrating the ludicrous nature of allegations that he is possessed by none other than Satan, Jesus' family finally arrives on the scene. "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you" (Mk 3.32b).

You'd think that Jesus might be glad to see his family, particularly when dealing with allegations of being either crazy or possessed. To have some friendly faces with him, to support him. But no. "And he replied, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother'" (Mk 3.33-35). Did Jesus just diss his family? So much for blood being thicker than water.

Actually, what Jesus says and the way he says it would have been a complete shock to Jesus' family, as well as to any who heard him. What Jesus said was so wrong! For generations, the Jews had understood that their place as God's people and their very salvation came through being born into a Jewish family. Getting married and having children were viewed as the highest of blessings. Family was critical to one's identity. Family was everything. And Jesus has the nerve to ask "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And even worse, he says that he has a new family. "Here are my mother and my brothers!" What! A new family defined not by blood, but by what one chooses to do? That this new family is defined as those who seek to do God's will, regardless of family background? Unthinkable!

Of course, Jesus' statement is not meant to belittle, demean, or deny family relationship and loyalty. Rather, it is a reminder that as a follower of Jesus, devotion to God's purposes is top priority. The arrival of the Kingdom of God changes everything and takes precedence over all other loyalties. The Kingdom of God even changes how we look at and define relationships. When Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brothers?", he calls attention to the broader dimension of relationships, to the broader understanding of family within this Kingdom. The understanding of the family of God, of which we are all a part.

On this new definition of family, Episcopal priest, the Rev. Dr. Henry King Oehmig notes, "Living by Jesus' truth will not dissolve our family loyalty, but it will remind us that unless we first respond to the love of God reaching out to us, we will have nothing to offer others." In other words, we are only able to love because God first loved us. Because God first showed us what love looks like, feels like. God's love for us is the model for love. We know how to love because God first loved us. Our own love for others is a response to God's love for us. We need Jesus' family, all those who are our mother and brothers and sisters, to be tangible manifestations of God's love in our own lives so that we can learn to love and, in return, be able to show love to others. To show love not only to our biological families, but to our family in Christ. To all whom we encounter.

In broadening the definition of family, Jesus also redefines the characteristics of family. In Jesus' time, family was defined, as is still often the case in our own culture, based on relationship to one's own father (small "f"). The father being viewed as the head of the family. The one who defined and controlled who is in the family. But Jesus said nothing about a father within the new definition of family. He does not rely on the dominant patriarchal model of family. Instead, Jesus says "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus's model of family is defined by and composed of the nurturing relationship of mother and child. Jesus' model of family is defined and composed of the more egalitarian relationships between siblings. Jesus' vision of family is based on relationships of nurture and equality, with God as the head of the family.

And just how do we become members of this new model of family, where we are all brothers and sisters and mothers to each other? That relationship characterized by equality, by mutual care and nurture of one another? Through baptism, of course. In which we first assent to the Baptismal Covenant to do the will of God by promising to “proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ.” Where we promise to “seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves” Where we promise to “strive for justice and peace among all people, and [respect] the dignity of every human being” (BCP, p.305). All of these marks of relationship based on nurture and equality. Baptism, that sacrament where through the waters of baptism we are born to a new life in Christ. Born into a new family not of blood, but of water.

So perhaps blood is not thicker than water after all. For in this new model of family that Christ has established, the model where we are indeed brothers and sisters, and even mothers to each other, it becomes apparent that water is thicker than blood.