

“Here Is My Family”

Mark 3:31-35

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In our text from Mark, Jesus pretty much blows the traditional definition of family out of the water! Once again, the disciples are caught in their pattern of narrow thinking. Over and over, Jesus invites the disciples to stretch their imaginations, to see the world through the eyes of faith, to quit standing on tradition! He is like everybody's best English teacher who taught us not to take everything too literally, lest we miss the deeper truths. The disciples had thought of family much as we do: siblings, parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, grandchildren, nieces, nephews.

Now he invites them to think of the family in a new way. This rather stunning passage reminds me of something that happened on the Lakota reservation where we lived in the 1970's. In that decade, tribal membership became a pressing issue; who qualified to be an enrolled member of the Tribe? Clearly, the full-blooded Lakota men and women were part of the tribal family. Those known as half-bloods were also readily accepted. Eventually the quarter-bloods were embraced. BUT...what about one eighth-bloods and one sixteenth-bloods? Could they be counted as equals in the great Sioux Nation?

In the midst of this controversy, Father Bear's Heart, the rector at the Episcopal Church in Eagle Butte, preached a memorable sermon. He said it didn't really matter whether you were a full-blooded Lakota, a direct descendant of Sitting Bull, or whether you were what was called a “two-drop” (two drops of Indian blood); it was having the blood of Christ that mattered. This didn't resolve the controversy, but

he was inviting the community to think differently about who was in and who was out. For Father Bear's Heart, anyone who was trying to do the will of God had a place in the family.

I'm sure Jesus' mother and brothers were quite shocked to hear their family was suddenly larger than they had realized. "Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister."

Whoever does the will of God... Mark leaves the reader hanging as to what the will of God actually is. Yet, a careful reading of his Gospel and of the rest of Scripture gives us some good clues. What follows now is my take on what it means to do the will of God.

First, I believe it is the will of God to be excellent stewards of all that God has created, all that God has provided: the earth, our minds, our bodies, and all our relationships! To do the will of God is to nurture life wherever we find it, in whatever form we find it.

Two weeks ago, three of us met in Dr. Beckett's field to glean last year's carrot crop. As we walked up the rows, we were startled by the sound and the quick, zig zag motions of a killdeer. A killdeer is a bird who builds her nest along the edge of a cultivated field. When she saw us coming, she launched into her dramatic dance, feigning a wounded wing, trying to draw us as far away as she could from the location of her nest so we wouldn't find her eggs. She was doing everything in her power to nurture life in its fragile state. I don't know if you can picture the killdeer from my description, but I lift her up this morning as a symbol of what it means to do the will of God: to do everything in our power to nurture God's gift of life!

Second, I believe it is the will of God that gratitude be the primary motivator of all our actions. Rather than be motivated by greed or revenge or guilt or envy, we are to let gratitude be the force that drives us. When gratitude is the motivator, miracles happen! Just walk through the new building. I consider it a miracle. It didn't happen because people were made to feel guilty; it happened because we all got in touch with our gratitude for God's generous presence in our personal and our church lives.

I am just coming off a most memorable weekend. My older brother, Bob, had been looking forward to attending his 50th high school reunion in Easthampton, Massachusetts. His cancer and his chemotherapy leave him too insecure to drive more than a mile or two from his home in New York. So, I took Friday and Saturday off to be his chauffeur and his care-giver. I'll spare you the details of the reunion, but what I must tell you is how grateful I am to have an older brother who has always been a role model for me. He is smart. He is athletic. He is handsome. He is a whiz at games and puzzles and giving directions. A number of people at the school asked me what I was doing there at Bob's reunion, as if I didn't exactly belong there. And what became so clear to me is that I was acting out of a lifetime of gratitude for a brother who has loved me without condition. He kept thanking me, but I kept saying, "No, I am the grateful one." The miracle happened in the four hours of driving, the four hours of one-on-one time. We were able to talk as we haven't in longer than I care to remember. To do the will of God is to be sure it is gratitude that is prompting the gift.

Third, I believe it is the will of God that a place be set at the table for everyone. When we were doing those final tasks of breaking up and packing up my mother's house, we found drawer upon drawer of placemats! Fancy ones! Ordinary ones! Lacey ones! Holiday theme ones! Maybe four or six dozen in all.

I thought of bringing them this morning as a visual aid, but I left them in the garage. They reminded me of so many meals in her home when a table would be added to the harvest table and then a third table added to that one, spilling into the fireplace room, and then maybe a card table onto the other one, pushing out into the hallway. It was almost comical. But it was also astounding to realize my mother was seeing to it that everyone had a place at her table. If the UPS guy happened to ring the bell, another chair would be added. I just lift up her collection of placemats as a sign of what it means to be radically inclusive, inviting everyone to the table!

As the By-Laws Committee labored so diligently over the last two years, this was the question that kept haunting them: who is not at the table? Whose voice is not being heard? Whose gifts are not being used?

Who isn't at the table? This is an essential question for any vital church. Is it the Spanish-speaking neighbor who isn't at the table? Is it the young adult who drives a '64 Dodge Dart? Is it the one whose grocery money never stretches to the end of the month? Who is missing from our table?

Lately, we've been having open conversations about the future of our ministry of music at South Church. We've been holding these conversations at different times of the day and different days of the week, hoping to be as inclusive as possible. These gatherings will continue in the fall. We're trying to capture a vision for the kind of musical ministry that will touch the soul of the whole church. We have heard from you a grand diversity of music that touches the soul; everything from Schumann and Bach to Beethoven's 9th Symphony, to Jesus Loves Me This I Know, to Amazing Grace How Sweet the Sound, to Do-op, to Bridge Over Troubled Waters, to Drove My Chevy to the Levee But the Levee Was Dry. We've been hearing it all!

When approached by a messenger that his mother and brothers had come for a visit, Jesus replied in a way no one could have anticipated. “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

What I have come to see clearly is that the one who practices good stewardship of all that God has created is doing the will of God, and is thereby kin to Christ.

The one whose motivation is grounded in gratitude is doing the will of God, and is thereby kin to Christ.

The one who seeks to be inclusive of those who are not typically invited to the table is doing the will of God, and is thereby kin to Christ.

This is how I came to terms with understanding what appears to be a rebuke of Jesus’ own family. It’s in his intentional broadening of the definition of family that I remain in the greatest of hope.
Amen!