

WGUMC October 28, 2018 Matthew 10:34-39; 12:46-50
John 19:25b-27 “What is Your Family?”

It’s almost November. We’re getting into crazy time. By that I mean extended family time. Big holiday gatherings stress even an almost perfect family, and I don’t know many of those. I’m reminded of a Rhymes with Orange cartoon I saw once. The dog says to the cat, “How long is eternity?” The cat says, “Twelve hours.” “That’s it?” the dog asks. The cat explains, “When people go to heaven, they’re supposed to reunite with their families for eternity. Twelve hours with their families is about the longest people can take.”

In this series on “What Would Jesus Say About...?” I figured that some of us would want to know what he would say about family relationships. Because we often fail to love the people who are nearest and dearest to us, it’s no wonder that we have so much trouble loving anyone else.

Unfortunately, in our Scriptures for this morning, we see that Jesus isn’t going to make it easy for us. For instance, the passage

about Jesus bringing not peace but a sword. Should we be worried about who gets the knife to carve the turkey at Thanksgiving?

Better get some context here. It helps to know that Jesus has been talking to his disciples about the opposition that they will encounter as they go out to proclaim the Good News. He's warning them that the Good News is going to stir up a lot of bad behavior. He says, "See, I am sending you out like sheep into the midst of wolves..." [Matthew 10:16] His disciples have to be prepared to be handed over to councils and dragged before governors and kings all because of Jesus. [10:17]

When that happens, there are going to be problems back home in their own families. It sounds horrific, but Jesus says, "Brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death; and you will be hated by all because of my name." [10:21-22] Whenever you think your family has problems, read these words and find comfort in them!

And you can be sure that they were a comfort to the early Christians who were being persecuted and martyred for their faith.

So that's what Jesus means when he talks about swords, when he says, "I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother." But he goes on to say, "Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." And what does he mean by that?

We are no longer martyred for our faith, but Jesus' words still hold a message for our families. What is that message? The verses in Chapter Twelve give us a clue. Jesus is presumably in a house teaching and his mother and brothers, who have come all the way from Nazareth, are waiting outside to speak to him. But when he hears this, he says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" In words that I as a mother would never want to hear, Jesus points to the crowd and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers!"

Wow. In just a few words, Jesus turned the world upside down and society as we know it inside out. I don't believe he hated his

mother or his brothers, but he radically redefined family. He didn't reject his kinfolk, but he rejected the belief that family is based on blood. Racists, nativists, Neo-Nazis, listen up. For Jesus, your true family is not your tribe. True family is predicated not on a blood relationship with an ethnic group but on our thicker-than-blood relationship with God. "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus explodes the concept of family. It's much, much bigger than we thought. And that's the subject of the book we're reading in our book study: *Love Without Limits*. When we ask the question, "How do we love our families?" we need to listen to what author Jaqueline Bussie says, "*the way we love is absurdly too small. Too selfish. Too limited. Too filled with exceptions. Our love is tiny; Jesus' is titanic. To follow Jesus, then, means to let God transform our love from tiny to titanic.*" [p. 32]

You might tell me that no one can love that much. No one can love a family as big as the human family. And it's true. Jesus says

that you will lose your life if you love that much. You've heard the expression "hurts like hell." Well, I know that love hurts but the alternative is hell.

When I worked at the Women's Center at Duke Divinity School, there was a poster on the wall with a quote from C.S. Lewis that I've been carrying with me ever since. He wrote:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside of heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is hell. [*The Four Loves*]

We don't want to live our lives in hell, so somehow our love has to get from tiny to titanic. We have to start somewhere. How does God want us to love our families? How do we love our mother and father, sister and brother, aunts and uncles, in-laws and out-laws,

without buying into the old definition of family, the old system of limited love?

As any psychologist will tell you, families are living systems. And some of those systems are not very healthy. We all know ways of loving that perpetuate the sickness in family systems. Ask any family member of an alcoholic or drug addict how they have enabled that person's illness. But it's also true of families where there is verbal or physical violence, emotional or sexual abuse, that gets replicated and passed down from one generation to the next.

Even if families are not infected by any of these dread diseases, families can still be stewing pots for all kinds of unhealthy thoughts and prejudices. As Lieutenant Joseph Cable sings in *South Pacific*, "You've got to be taught before it's too late, before you are six or seven or eight to hate all the people your relatives hate. You've got to be carefully taught." And we are.

The only way to unlearn the limits on our love is to do the will of our Father in heaven. If we love God first and most, we'll be able

to love our family best. Now it may not look like love from their perspective, because it will change their life and they may not want to change. It may not even look like love from our perspective, but that doesn't excuse us from having to take up the cross of loving. For we have to be prepared to lose our life for love's sake if we ever want to save it.

However, not all of our family members will be able to receive that love. So what Jesus said to his disciples also applies to us: "If the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. If anyone will not welcome you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town." [10:12-14]

Your family are the people who will welcome you, listen to your words, love you and receive your love. They may be your blood relations but they may not be. They may be just friends, instead. When your friends are more like family than your own family, you can call them your "family."

Church is a kind of family. If we are doing the will of our Mother in heaven, we are welcoming you, listening to your stories, loving you and receiving your love. And when we do that we are family. That's because we know that there is something much thicker than blood that binds us together: our faith. The disciples of Jesus were a family, a true family, and everyone who follows him can belong.

Let me tell you a story about a family I know. By now you've all heard about the Village House and the women who have been our guests here and in other churches. They don't always get along, but they do their best. Back in February, we welcomed Alma and fell in love with her. She always made us laugh.

So we were happy sad when we found out that she had made arrangements to go to live with some of her family in San Antonio. Alma left the week before I was going to be there for a conference, so I thought I'd check up on her. But before I ever got on the plane, I learned that she was back here.

When she arrived in Texas, she went to the home of the family matriarch, who told her in no uncertain terms that she would not have anything to do with her and the family never wanted to see her again. Alma was shocked, to say the least. Why hadn't her aunt said something before she got there? Alma was left stranded in a strange city and didn't know what to do. She was going to have to learn the hard way that sometimes you have to shake the dust from your feet as you leave that house.

Then Alma got an idea about how she could let her peace return to her. She called one of her friends from Village House, and that friend helped her get a cheap plane ticket back to San Jose that very Saturday. Because that's just what family members do for one another, no matter if they are related to one another.

I don't think it's a coincidence that Alma's name means "soul." And her friend's name is Faith. After all, what is a true family, but a collection of souls held together by faith. And I want to thank them for letting me tell this story.

Getting back to Jesus. He may have stood up his mother and his brothers in Capernaum, but he took a very different approach when he was on the cross. From that place of mortal pain, he looked down and saw his mother and John standing beside her, and he said to Mary, “Woman, here is your son.” And he said to John, “Here is your mother.” Jesus was dying but he was still creating families, a true family based on love and faith. “And from that hour the disciple took her into his own home.”

This Thanksgiving, you may be inviting family into your home. If your blood family will not have you or does not know how to love you and refuses to let you love them, you can always adopt a different one. Sometime during this holiday season, invite your family over for a meal. Thank them for being a father or mother, sister or brother to you. Thank them for showing you how to love with a love that may have started out tiny but is destined to be titanic. And may the peace that you give them return to you and guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.