

WGUMC August 18, 2019 “You Are Family”
Mark 3:13-15; 19b-21 and Matthew 12:46-50

This morning, I read two stories that open up for us a little window into the not-so-easy relationship that Jesus had with his family back in Nazareth. But before I talk about these passages and what they might mean for our family relationships, I want to remind you how radical Jesus really was.

Christians, I’m afraid, usually give Jesus the Martin Luther King, Jr. treatment. What I mean by that is that we like to remember MLK for his civil rights marches, his letter from Birmingham Jail, but not for his sharp critique of capitalism or his opposition to the Vietnam War. Likewise, we want to remember Jesus as the baby born in a stable, the Good Shepherd who found the lost lamb, the miracle worker who fed the 5,000. We aren’t so comfortable with boundary-crossing Jesus who ate with tax collectors, talked to women, and touched lepers or the temple-cleansing Jesus who overturned the tables of the moneychangers or the razor-tongued Jesus who warned the wealthy and heckled the hypocrites. No, we want a milk-

toast Martin and a gentle Jesus. But that's not who we are going to get in our readings this morning. We are going to get the not-so-cuddly Jesus who radically redefines the human family.

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus has started his public ministry and now he is ready to formally appoint twelve of his disciples to be sent out to proclaim the message.

Now, for those who get their Christianity mostly from TV or social media, the message they are getting is almost the exact opposite of the message that Jesus lived to give. The message is not a bunch of rules and restrictions. It is not a list of things you have to believe. The message is simply a gift to receive. We call it the Good News, and if it isn't good news to you, if it doesn't make you feel totally loved, if it doesn't bring you lots more life, it isn't the Gospel.

Jesus said that he came to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free and to proclaim the year of the Lord's

favor. That year is this year. That gift is for you. That is the message. [Luke 4:18-19]

But the disciples were sent out not only with a message, but with authority to cast out demons. I love first-century psychology! But when we think about it, we all have demons, don't we? What about all those voices in our heads telling us that we aren't good enough, attractive or successful enough, that we aren't...enough? What about all the lies we tell ourselves so that we don't have to face the truth of ourselves? What about all those internal divisions, divided loyalties, that keep us feeling so fractured and fragmented? Don't we long for someone or something to come along and cast out those demons or, better yet, show us how we can face them, embrace them and become whole, fully-integrated human beings in spite of them?

Whether we use the language of first-century or twenty-first century psychology, we humans have always longed for wholeness. No surprise, then, that the crowd around Jesus welcomed his

message. They ate it up, so much so that he and his disciples couldn't eat. But that's not the end of the story.

We read on and realize that those who are invested in keeping people broken and scared to death are not going to tolerate anyone coming along helping people get whole and get ready for life. Jesus had broken the law by healing on the Sabbath, so the religious authorities began to plot against him. Bring new life and you're going to invite death. Jesus' family knew this which is why they came to try to bring him home. Some people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind," and his mother and brothers were inclined to agree.

We learn the hard way that when we go outside the boundaries set by our families, someone is going to think we are out of our mind. Whether we go outside the bounds of our race or class or we defy the rules set up to police our gender expression or sexual orientation, someone in the family is bound to write us off as out of our mind.

Jesus was not out of his mind. His real problem, what was scaring his family, was that he was getting into God's mind. He was redefining Sabbath as a sacred time that is not about rules but about restoration. That is why the scribes were accusing him of being possessed by Beelzebul, by the devil. And Jesus' response to them is helpful for us.

Jesus warned them not to blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. [Mark 3:29] I use to wonder what he meant. Now I've come to believe that we blaspheme against the Holy Spirit whenever we deny what is holy in ourselves or in others. The scribes denied that Jesus' healing power was divine. They thought his power was diabolic. When any of us deny who we truly are, the power and the passion and the promise that God planted in each of us, we are blaspheming the Holy Spirit that is in us. Jesus refused to do that and so must we.

So to my LGBTQ brothers and sisters, I say: whatever you do, be true to what is holy and real and powerful within you. That's what

my colleague back in Oregon finally had to do. More than twenty years ago, Greg left the church we were both serving and surrendered his ministerial credentials because he could no longer serve in an institution that wasn't willing to affirm the holy love that was in him. It's taken too long, but he wouldn't have to do that today, not here in the West, anyway.

This story about Jesus and his family was important enough that we get it again in Matthew's Gospel, but in his telling of it, we not only have Jesus breaking the Sabbath, we have him remaking the family. Jesus' mother and brothers come to the house wanting to talk to him. When he hears that they are waiting outside, he says, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" In words that this mother would never want to hear, Jesus points to his disciples 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 didn't like the way we limit family. He

didn't reject his kinfolk, but he rejected the assumption that family is based on blood. Racists, white nationalists, Neo-Nazis, listen up. For Jesus, your true family is not your tribe. True family is not determined by blood relationship to any group of people but on a thicker-than-blood relationship with God.

Jesus said, "For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." And the will of God is pretty simple: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." [John 15:12] That's it. Your family is made up of the people who love you, and they are not necessarily the same folks who are related by blood to you. Church is supposed to be that family where everyone is related by love.

I know. That isn't always the case, but I would have given up long ago if I didn't regularly encounter the most amazing, life-giving, utterly selfless love in people who are just following Jesus in churches that are trying to be God's family.

Let me tell you about one of those churches. When I was living in Eugene, Oregon, I met my husband who at the time was living in a Christian communal household with another straight man and a lesbian couple. We started dating, but we had a problem. We wanted to be in church together on Sunday mornings, but I was busy at the Methodist Church and he was attending mass at the Newman Center. So we decided to worship on Sunday afternoons with his housemates and their gay friends at a tiny MCC church in Eugene.

If you've never heard of it, the Metropolitan Community Church is a denomination that was started in Los Angeles in 1968 by gay Christians who had been kicked out of their churches. Hank had been worshipping with his housemates for a while and when I first showed up, I was a little embarrassed to be told that I was an answer to prayer. Evidently, Hank had been asking his gay friends to pray that he would find a wife. Goes to show you the power of gays who pray!

I loved that little congregation and they loved me. I learned from them what a family defined by love feels like. I was so moved

by the way they cared for each other, by the way they prayed with each other, by the way they supported and affirmed each other, and by the way they forgave each other. So when Hank and I were planning the wedding, we wanted them to be a part of it.

Their Pastor Gary was one of six clergy to officiate at the ceremony. And I'll never forget what he said on the night of the rehearsal. We were all gathered in the sanctuary of Wesley UMC: Hank's Jewish family; his Catholic buddies from the Newman Center; our friends from MCC; the tribal elders he worked with as a linguist on the Warm Springs reservation; a legally blind friend and soloist who was there with her guide dog; three Methodist clergy; two Catholic priests; Rev. Gary and my wonderful midwestern family who were surely thinking that I was out of my mind. Gary looked around at all of us and our beautifully crazy diversity and what he saw was God's family, not based on blood but on love. And he said to us, "You know, if Jesus is coming back, I think now would be a really good time."

Ever since that night, I've been trying to recreate that moment in every church I serve in my ministry. Sometimes, like today, I get a taste of it. Here is the manifold beauty of God. I can see it. You are so loved. I can feel it. And that means you are family. I know it. May God bless you all more than you could ever hope for or imagine. So be it.