

PROPER FIVE (PENTECOST 2) YEAR B, JUNE 6, 2021

In the book *To Kill A Mockingbird*, Atticus says, "You can choose your friends but you sure can't choose your family and they're still kin to you no matter whether you acknowledge them or not, and it makes you look right silly when you don't"

We talk a lot about families today and family values. We have a lot of families: our genetic family, our church family, the military family, our cultural family, our American family and practically any organization you belong to refers to itself as a family. We like to believe that families take care of their own. Sometimes they do and sometimes they don't. Well, in today's Gospel Jesus asks that very question "who are my mother and brothers?" Sounds like a strange question for Jesus to raise and it puts into question, not only who is my family but how do we define family?

First of all, let's take a look at what family meant in Jesus' time. In first century Palestine, the extended family meant everything. It not only was the source of one's status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network and it was deeply rooted in the concept of honor and shame. Family loyalty was keen, not just because people loved and cared for one another but more so because family needed one another to survive and even hope to thrive. To be cast out of the family unit (or to leave voluntarily) could mean economic hardship and even certain death. Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of these vital networks as well as loss of connection to the land. You get the point that to leave family was dangerous. Not only did you leave behind your key social support, you left your entire identity as part of the family behind. And if you left your family voluntarily it was to shame them.

When Jesus' family comes "to restrain him, it's because people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'. They come as much to protect themselves as it is to protect him, and perhaps more so! Even the larger community he belongs too attempts to cast him out. When someone goes against the grain the rest of the community needs to validate itself. In the Mediterranean world of the first century labels such as "sinner," "unclean," or "barren" were devastating. Most serious of all were accusations of sorcery, that is, being possessed by and having the power of Satan. Such labels not only marked one as deviant but, once acquired, could be nearly impossible to shake. Jesus' opponents acknowledge that he casts out demons, but also accuse him of being a deviant and seek to shame him publicly in order to ostracize him from the community. If the label could be made to stick his credibility with his audience would have been irreparably damaged and they hoped he would fade away into the countryside and their honor restored.

Now, it's easy for us, having the benefit of historical hindsight, to write off these people who accuse Jesus of insanity and demon possession. However, the fact is, neither Jesus's family nor the scribes from Jerusalem are ill-intentioned. They are earnest people dedicated to maintaining stability. Jesus's family desires order and peace in the domestic sphere while the scribes desire order and peace in the religious sphere. They're not out to thwart God; they just want to keep things respectable and honorable.

So, a lot of how first century families existed with the shame and honor system isn't all that different from how we function as family today. Families tend to stick together sometimes covering up illness or other problems or they will even ostracize a member if they think that person has betrayed the family in some way.

We can go even further that it's not just family units that do this but also the wider social media families. Just look at how social media can blow things and people's reputation out of the water. We know that if you go to facebook, twitter, Instagram, twitch there are people who will start a campaign against you to try to shame you or make fun of you. They'll sometimes go to extreme lengths to keep others, whoever they decide are the others, at bay. It certainly doesn't sound much different than 1st century people.

So, it is within this context that Jesus responds to his family and the scribes quite emphatically and, frankly, harsh. He is not only redefining and expanding the definition of family, he's redefining their identity. Jesus isn't calling for surface change here. He's going for the deep institutional, and systemic change. Outside is in, and inside is out, and the people least likely to get it are usually the ones who consider themselves the most knowledgeable, the most "churchy," and the most spiritually stable. Because Jesus is telling them membership in God's family is open to all, equally, without discrimination—based only on a willingness to do God's will. This undercuts any practices in the community of faith that discriminate on the basis of gender, race, social class, age, sexuality or any other of our human lines of insider-outsider distinction.

Jesus expands the definition of family to be a web of relationships that opens up for a whole host of others. Jesus moves our understanding of family from simply a place of genetic origins to an understanding of family being a group of people that is marked instead by the choices we make. As he says "whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister.

Jesus is blowing off the doors of established beliefs and concepts. Family is defined by who does the will of God. That's a broad spectrum. Every time we think we can box God in and say this is absolutely who God is or what God stands for we are pushed to a different reality. The real point is that the label of family member or club associate or even Church affiliate is not what gives the automatic recognition of family, it is rather the adoption and practice of those values and ethics that Jesus values so highly. The values and actions of tolerance, of compassion, of concern for neighbors, of love for those who are different – these are the things that bring us to the point where we can call ourselves members of Christ's family.

When Jesus declared, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," it challenged the Jewish culture around him. No longer are you close to God because you were born into a Jewish household; no longer do you just take care of your own kind; instead, your family is being extended to anyone who does the will of God.

That certainly broadens the margins and challenges those who took that relationship with God for granted. Today, it challenges us to look beyond our walls, our denominational lines, our socio-economic status, our political beliefs, our sexuality and even our particular religious beliefs to see our brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers. God calls us to expand our family in ways that are just as shocking as it was to the Gospel of Mark's first-century audience.

It's easier said than done, of course. Anthony de Mello a Jesuit priest and psychotherapist told a story that reminds us of this:

A man traversed land and sea to check out for himself the Master's extraordinary fame. "What miracles has your Master worked?" he asked a disciple. "Well, there are miracles and miracles. In your land it is regarded as a miracle if God does someone's will. In our country it is regarded as a miracle if someone does the will of God."

Doing the will of God often means leaving our comfort zones. As Episcopalians, our Baptismal Covenant demands a life that follows God by proclaiming by word and example the Good News of God in Christ, seeking and serving Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as ourselves, striving for justice and peace among all people, and respecting the dignity of every human being. This is not an easy road to journey! Yet we readily answer, "I will, with God's help." It is a daily struggle to put it into practice.

So who is our family? As Jesus looked around him at the crowd of misfits, those ostracized because of illness, poverty, gender social class, and his relentlessly undiscerning disciples he said, "This is my family!"...It is just the diverse mess of humanity, with all of its moral, physical, spiritual beauty and imperfection". And yes, we will fail over and over again about who our family is but "In Christ we are forgiven all our failed efforts at community, and are invited afresh to rejoin the family of God. In the end to be made a member of the family of God is pure grace and pure love. Now I think that's a family everyone wants to be a part of. Amen.