

But.....They're Family
Mark 3:20-35
Don Lincoln

I grew up in a family that didn't live close to family. Only a couple of my parents' eight siblings remained close to home. My grandparents were very far away. The rest of my parents' siblings scattered across the country for education, spouses, or jobs.

Some aunts and uncles we rarely saw – others we visited more often. But there were the select few – the ones we – or my parents in later years – actually went on extended vacations with. My parents' favorite siblings – the favorite favorites!

Anybody have family favorites? Parents aren't supposed to say they have favorite children – we all know that – but c'mon, some of you surely have favorite favorite family members.....or perhaps NON-favorite ones?

I often tell couples preparing for marriage that navigating their families of origin can be tricky. I remind them "You don't get to choose your family – parents or their siblings – you get what you get. We forget that about family.

Jesus is having family issues in this text. Crowds are gathering because of His healing, His unique teaching and some are picking up with Him and following His call to ministry. Jesus is creating a stir in the community and His family gets word that He is behaving as if He were fit for the loony bin, or possessed by demons, and they – His family – have come to intervene.

The New International Version of the text says Jesus' blood relatives "**set out to take charge of Him.**" I had no idea they had family interventions in 1st Century!

Anybody got family members with a Messiah-complex? Or perhaps just self-centered, or the know-it-all in the clan, or the one who is always spouting off political nonsense. "Shhhhh!" We say. "Stop it. You're making the rest of us miserable – or you're embarrassing us." Family is family, so we feel responsible – but holy cow, some of the people we are expected to love.....

Jesus has retreated to a home, ready to have a meal with disciples that He has just called, but there's such a crowd following Him, they're pressing in, it's hard to sit down and eat. Jesus' mother and brothers show up, and are standing outside – either uninvited or unwilling to enter the house – they send word to Jesus, "Your mother and brothers are outside asking for You."

Imagine delivering that message!

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” Jesus responds. And with His characteristic sweeping gaze, Jesus takes in the crowd around Him and says “HERE are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

For we – who think family trumps everything – this can be a hard word. But imagine how critical this understanding was for the early church – among Jews and Jewish Christians in particular – as a basis for their future Gentile mission. For as hard as this may sound, family – blood relatives – had to be secondary to the family of God.

Jesus’ promise is whoever hears and does God’s will are His true relatives. They become not only His brother, sister or mother, but in fact they become their own deepest selves – they find real selfhood in kinship with Jesus. For the early Christian community, which crossed all sorts of social, cultural, ethnic, religious and familial boundaries, this understanding was critical.

From our friend Steve Garnaas-Holmes this week in our regular reflections – we get them daily most of us on the staff – you can see our gathering thought:

“In a culture where family is right up there with God, maybe higher.....Jesus says, “Yeah, family IS IT. But family isn't blood. It's love.” Without, by the way, a “father,” an authority figure. Just God.

No more tiny family, with my little fence around who I care for, who I'm responsible to. Instead You give me this infinite family. All those who follow you differently than I do – I belong to them. We are one. I am to care as much about strangers as my own sister, respect opponents no less than my own brother, honor people so unlike me as my own mother.

And this miracle: though it seems hard to love them all as if they are mine, when I do – I come home.”¹

Craig Barnes, President of Princeton Seminary tells the story of one night when he was a boy, his father woke him up and introduced him to his new brother, Roger.

Barnes’ father was the pastor of a church in a poor community, and Roger came to services at his father’s church with his mother. The pastor had talked to the family and tried to help the mother and father with their addictions, to no avail. At one point he gave Roger the police emergency phone number and his own phone number and told him if anything happened to his parents, call the police first and then call him.

Sure enough, the call came.

Roger couldn’t wake his parents up, and when the police arrived, they confirmed that both the mother and father had died of heroin overdoses. Pastor Barnes volunteered to take the boy home for the night, having no other family to go to. “Somewhere on that

drive home from the projects,” Craig Barnes recalls, “my father decided he needed to adopt Roger.”

Roger was welcomed to their table – a very different dinner table in the more disciplined pastor’s home than in the home of two addicts. There were many dinner table lessons for Roger, who was a frightened and angry young man. But the grace of that family’s table welcome slowly transformed him. As grace freely given and undeservedly received at the table always does.

Roger enlisted in the Army during Vietnam. One day, the family received a telegram that Roger had been killed in combat. Later they learned Roger died in an act of heroism that saved the lives of others, and his mother asked how the frightened, angry boy they brought into their family became a hero?

“Mama, I know the answer to that,” Craig Barnes recalls telling her. “It was all of those table lessons, because he was paying attention to the grace that he had received.”²

I said earlier we don’t get to choose who our family is. But we love them (or are supposed to) anyway. We don’t get to choose family in God’s kingdom either. The challenge from Jesus in these words is not a call to love our biological families less, it is a call to love everyone else more, to love everyone as much as we love family. And that is what you and I DO get to choose to do!

May it be so.
AMEN.

1. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, *Unfolding Light Reflection*, 6/2/21.
2. Craig Barnes, from an address at the virtual *Festival of Homiletics*, reported in the PCUSA News Service May 20, 2021