**“The Family of God”**

Mark 3:20-35

After completing my first year of Seminary, I spent the next summer in Spartanburg, South Carolina doing a ten-week Summer Internship. And on one of the Sundays when I was scheduled to preach, my mom and dad came to listen to my sermon, and they brought along with them my seven-year-old niece, Katie.

On the night before the service, my parents were explaining to Katie that Uncle Dave was going to be the preacher in church the next day. Well, Katie looked up at me and somewhat suspiciously questioned, “I’m a Presbyterian, Uncle Dave, what are you?” I responded that I was also a Presbyterian, but I inquired why she had asked. She explained that Naunee, that’s her other grandmother, was a Baptist, but her mommy and daddy were Presbyterians. From the tone of her voice and her facial expressions, it was apparent that Presbyterians were ‘in’ and everything else was ‘out!’

At a very early age we begin to draw lines, lines that determine who is ‘in’ and who’s ‘out.’ And we learn these lines from our parents, our friends, television, and movies. And these lines define for us who’s right and who’s wrong, who’s good and who’s evil, who’s smart and who’s not so smart, who’s superior and who’s worthless.

I tried to explain to Katie that Baptists and Presbyterians were both Christian churches equally loved by God, but her eyes continued to show suspicion. For Katie, anything other than Presbyterian was second rate.

From our youth, we learn to distrust anyone who thinks, acts, or looks different from our predetermined norm. And we place ourselves on the inside of the circle we draw, and, everyone who is different, we place on the outside of the circle.

Throughout the centuries, this human contest of ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’ has stifled the work of the Christian church, not only on the universal level of denominations, but also at the level of the local Church. We just don’t trust people who are different from us. We can’t understand people who behave in a manner different from our own. And it’s my belief that this same type of mistrust and friction is at the bottom of our New Testament story this morning.

In his ministry and teachings, Jesus said and did all sorts of things that seemed peculiar to the people of his day. In last week’s scripture reading, Jesus did things on the Sabbath completely against the accepted standards of his day. And in other stories, he associated with people completely outside the circle of acceptable moral and ethical society. So many things that Jesus did and taught blurred the lines between insiders and outsiders. And the local religious leaders, the presumed insiders, didn’t like it and were already plotting to kill Jesus.

So, when we hear that the Scribes from Jerusalem have come to see Jesus, we can assume that the local religious officials have called in the big guns—the experts in religious law—to take care of Jesus. Right off the bat, the Big Guns begin their work of character assassination. Back in the 1950’s, anyone stepping outside the circle of ‘appropriate behavior’ was quickly labeled a ‘Communist’ by Senator Eugene McCarthy, and from that point on their career was pretty much finished. Using that same method, the Scribes tried to ruin Jesus’ reputation by saying, “The only reason why Jesus is able to cast out demons of the devil is because he’s working for the devil.”

“Well, that’s ridiculous,” says Jesus. “It makes no sense at all. Why would Satan undo his own work? The only way a person can undo the work of Satan is with a power that’s stronger than Satan.”

And then Jesus says to the Scribes, “You might want to be careful about insinuating that my power comes from an evil spirit.” “Listen to this carefully.” Says Jesus. “There is nothing done or said that can’t be forgiven. But if you persist in your slanders against God’s Holy Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives, sawing off the branch on which you’re sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives.”

Now did you see what just happened there? The religious insiders of his day, the expert teachers of the Laws of Moses, have suddenly made themselves outsiders from the followers of Jesus.

But the religious insiders were not the only group concerned about the ministry of Jesus. There’s another group of presumed insiders mentioned in this story, and they’re also concerned that maybe Jesus is going just a little bit too far in his thinking and teaching.

“He’s gone crazy.” That’s what people were saying, and his family was concerned. “The things he’s doing and the things he’s saying—touching outcast lepers, eating with sinners, healing on the Sabbath—he must be crazy!” And this morning’s story says that his family came to “take charge of him,” and these words could also be translated as, “They came to restrain him.”

Now certainly his family was concerned for Jesus’ welfare and wellbeing, but let’s face it. We are all judged to some extent by the actions of our family. Presumptions are made about our ethics, our character, by the actions and behavior of our parents, our children, and our siblings. So, it’s only natural for us to want our family to conform, to fit in. We don’t’ want our family members to buck the system, because their behavior reflects on us. And Jesus’ family was no different.

Standing outside the crowded house, Jesus’ family tried to pass a message in that they want to speak to their brother and son. They’ve come to straighten him out. They’ve come to pull him back in line. Now did you see what just happened there? The ultimate insider group, his own family, is standing outside the house that is filled with the insiders who follow Jesus, those who trust Jesus, those who believe in Jesus. And Jesus uses this image to make a point.

“Who is my true family?” asks Jesus. “Who is my mother, and my brother, and my sister?” And the answer is: “Whoever does the will of God.” But this raises another question, doesn’t it? What does it mean to follow the will of God? What does it look like to live our lives as a brother or sister of Christ?

Let me tell you a story I read many years ago about Tommy Gordon. Tommy is an elder from Pulaski, Tennessee. Tommy works with outcasts. He works with homeless men who are drug addicts. And thanks to Tommy’s hard work and dedication, the New Canaan Ranch, a drug rehabilitation center, was saved from bankruptcy. The New Canaan Ranch has a 70% success rate in helping these homeless outcasts in kicking their drug habit.

But that’s not all that Tommy does. Once a year, he leads a protest against the Ku Klux Klan. You see, Pulaski, Tennessee is known as the birthplace of the KKK, and once a year the Klan marches down the main street of Downtown Pulaski. Tommy Gordon leads a group of Pulaski citizens who disclaim the racist and bigoted idolatry of the Klan. The Klan points to certain groups of people and labels them as outsiders. But Tommy Gordan see everyone as part of God’s creation, all equally loved by God. In my opinion, Tommy Gordon is a brother of Jesus Christ.

There’s also a story about Beulah Travis. At the time when I first read this story, Beulah was 90 years old, but worked almost every day at the McConaghy Youth Center which she founded when she was 63. She provides academic, emotional, and social enrichment to low-income children, kids that most of our society has forgotten. Beulah knows that if these children are to prosper, they need a home where their parents or guardians take responsibility for their learning. So, Beulah strives to challenge and empower parents to be parents. In my opinion, Beulah Travis is a sister of Jesus Christ.

Now there’s also a story about Pat McCann. A lot of people call Pat a ‘weirdo.’ She spends most of her time working with the outcast homeless of Olympia, Washington. “[Working with the homeless] doesn’t make you very popular in your community.” Says Pat McCann. “Others are embarrassed [to do this type of work], but it feels good to me.” Most people in Olympia, Washington call Pat a ‘weirdo,’ but I call her a sister of Jesus Christ.

Tommy Gordan, Beulah Travis, and Pat McCann—what do these three people have in common? Just like Jesus, they’re all reaching out to the outcast members of our society, reminding them that God cares and showing them that Christians care.

And there’s something else they share in common. All three of these people are facing evil head-on. Bigotry, homelessness, drug abuse, poverty, these brothers and sisters of Christ face these demons every day, daring to believe that the power of the Holy Spirit is still present and still working in our world today, trusting that the Holy Spirit is strong enough to bind these demons.

Christian Outreach Ministry isn’t always the popular thing to do. Some people will think you are a ‘weirdo.’ Others might say you’re crazy. Some people might wonder why you associate with ‘those kind of people.’ People won’t understand why you do the things you do.

Well, you just tell them that you are a part of an ever-enlarging family. It’s not a very prestigious group by worldly standards. Our fatherwill let anybody in. The color of your skin won’t keep you out. What side of the tracks you’re born on doesn’t matter, and there’s nothing from your past that can’t be forgiven. You simply need to claim the forgiveness that’s offered through your brother, Jesus; and then live your life held in the warm embrace of your heavenly father’s love and live your life as a grateful member of your father’s family. *You’ve used father a lot in this paragraph. Do you want to keep the masculine?*

And a part of living your life as a grateful member of God’s family is going out and witnessing God’s love to others and inviting them to come join the family. So, ask yourselves this: Who are the outcasts whom we are called to love? What are the demons we are called to face? Who are we called to welcome into the family of God?

Let us Pray:

Our loving and gracious God, help us to understand your will. Fill us with your Holy Spirit, that we might see and follow your will, as the Spirit leads us to follow Jesus, teaching us how to be responsible and productive members of your family. Amen.

David A. Cagle

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