

“We Are Family” – Mar 3:20-35

Wow! In all my years in ministry I’ve never had to preach from this text. That has mostly to do with the vagaries of the lectionary readings at the intersection of the lunar and solar calendars – this year East is the second-earliest it can ever be, and so we delve into some of the unfamiliar readings at the beginning of the Season of Pentecost. There is, however, another meaningful reason, and that is that I would probably never preach on this text if it didn’t come up in the lectionary.

It’s a harsh and difficult text in several ways. The first challenge derives from that really uncomfortable part about an unforgivable sin, namely blaspheming the Holy Spirit. The second difficulty arises from the apparent rejection by Jesus of his biological family, using some fairly unfriendly language as he does so.

However, as I dug into the text a bit I began to discover that there are not only some mitigating explanations that we might use to be more comfortable, there is also a hugely powerful message of grace and inclusion from Jesus, a message that continues to resonate throughout the church today.

Let’s start at the beginning ... in fact, let’s start before the beginning of our text. Sadly, the lectionary omits a key piece of information by starting at the beginning of verse 20: “and the crowd came together again ...” The missing information is provided by the last half of verse 19: “Then [Jesus] went home, ...” Back to a place of refuge, back to familiar ground, back to where he was well-known and could expect some support from his family.

Back from where? Well, if we read back a bit further in Mark’s gospel, at the beginning of Chapter 2, we discover that Jesus had once before returned home – to Capernaum, where the crowds gathered around him so completely that some friends had to let a paralyzed man down through a hole in the roof. We aren’t told what Jesus’ family thought about the damage done to the house, only that Jesus cured the man and the scribes accused him of blasphemy – remember that last bit because we’ll come back to it as we hear later Jesus’ response to the scribes.

Whether or not Jesus stayed to help repair the roof we’ll never know, but we are told that he headed out along the sea, gathering great crowds and stopping to eat and drink with Levi, the tax collector, at which time he was challenged by the Pharisees for eating and drinking with sinners. That same group of puritans were later enraged by Jesus’ answer to them about eating grain in a wheat field on the Sabbath, and even more so when he cured a man with a lame hand in the synagogue on a Sabbath.

Once again Jesus retreats to the sea, surrounded by great crowds, and where even the evil spirits fell down before him. It was here that Jesus appointed his twelve closest followers as disciples, and then returned home, where we join the story.

First, regarding the unforgivable sin issue ... note that even Mark feels he has to remind us that Jesus’ comment about blaspheming the Holy Spirit being unforgivable was targeted at the Scribes – remember the ones who previously had accused Jesus himself of blasphemy as he cured the lame man, and who now accuse him of being in league with the Devil? That’s where that harsh comment comes from ... it is Jesus’ pronouncement back upon the Scribes, not a dire warning about some trap for us. Why such a harsh rebuke from Jesus? I wonder if it wasn’t due in part to a phenomenon that young men are especially vulnerable to, namely the rapid development of a “smart mouth” when they discover a new-found sense of power. I think most of you men – and perhaps women also – recognize the phenomenon, whether it was “lipping off” to a teacher, a boss, or parents. In any event, that might explain not only Jesus’ harsh response to the Scribes but also the difficult saying about his mother and brothers and sisters.

What then about the issue of family? Again, flushed with a new cadre of disciples and thronged by people eager to hear what he had to say, I wonder if the young, just-starting-out Jesus was prone to blurt out his new understandings in ways that he would later temper and smooth out a bit. Also, there are a few things we need to look at regarding the context of Jesus' comments before we can make some sense out of what he said. To begin, we need to understand what the concept of family meant in Jesus' day. Most of us have a very Western view of family – not in the sense of cowboys and the “Old West”, but a picture that has been conditioned by Norman Rockwell paintings and the Age of Reason or Enlightenment. Our family units are not particularly tight, and easily split by the sense of individualism that defines our culture. The family unit in Jesus' day was perhaps more akin to that of an Afghanistan tribal culture, with deep bonds and a large, extended range across both generations and parallel blood lines (e.g. cousins). For Jesus to make a comment such as he did, asking “who are my mother and brothers and sisters?” he had to know the profound impact on his listeners as to the strangeness of his question – and the even greater strangeness of his answer. While adoption was not unheard of in Roman society, and even in ancient Israel, a drastic redefinition of the family was outlandish.

Also, we need to remember that in the long run Jesus did not abandon his biological family, nor did they abandon him. His mother, and presumably his siblings, were present at his crucifixion, and tended to his body after death. His brothers became an essential and integral part of the nucleus of the newly-forming church in Jerusalem.

So, seemingly Jesus was not throwing his biological family away, nor was he proposing a new cultural definition of the family unit. To what then could he have been referring, if not to a radical expansion of faith? “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother”, he goes on to say. Aha! A new definition not of the human family, but of a linking together in a new and unbreakable way of those who seek to do the will of God. A linking of people together bonded as tightly as an Afghanistan tribe, but quite radically a new type of family that is open to newcomers, to those who are joined through faith and faith in action. We can see an affirmation of this understanding by reading on in Mark's gospel, where right after this episode we see Jesus again speaking to large crowds by the sea, and specifically about the parable of sowing the seeds, some on rocky ground and some on good soil, and he even goes on to explain the parable to his close followers in terms of preaching the good news of God's redemption to people.

So, how then do we reach out and invite people to become part of this new family, this wide-ranging and disparate (not necessarily desperate!) collection of people? While I was with family this past week on Savary Island (and there was as disparate a group of people as you might find anywhere!) I had a bit of a chance to do some reading, and the e-book I had brought along was titled “Evangelism for Normal People: Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach” by John Bowen. It's a good read, and puts a new and more appealing face on evangelism than the usual “flasher” model (i.e. jumping out of the bushes and ambushing someone with questions such as “have you been saved?!”) In particular he develops an understanding of evangelism from the Gospel of John that shows a model of living a lifestyle in the community that is both different from and attractive to the people of the community, and which causes them to begin to ask questions about the faith that obviously lies at the heart of such living. I was struck by the similarity of that understanding with what I was reading in Mark's gospel, of Jesus declaring that those who were doing the will of God – and also sowing the seeds through explaining the love of God – was in such parallel and harmony with what was in Bowen's book.

More than that, it struck me that what we are doing at Central, both with our outreach through serving Christ in the community around us and with our ambitious plans to do more of the same was pretty close to what was both in Bowen's book and in Mark's gospel. We are indeed family, not just with each other here, but with people all around our community, and our world. If doing the will of God is what defines the new family of faith that ties us together with Christ and with other Christians, and if reaching out through both our example of lifestyle and proclaiming the word is consistent with the actions Jesus called for from his followers, then I'm pretty sure we're definitely part of that new family of faith, and can rest assured that we are in no danger of being rejected like the Scribes and Pharisees, and are doing what we can to bring glory to God in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.