

“Redefining Family” – Mar 3:20-35

In thirty years in ministry this is only the second opportunity I’ve ever 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 – again this year Easter is about the earliest it can ever be and so we are presented with some unfamiliar readings that are selected at the beginning of the Season of Pentecost. There is, however, another meaningful reason that it’s only my second attempt and that is that I would probably never preach on this text if it didn’t come up in the lectionary.

The main reason for my reluctance is that this text presents a couple of challenges resulting from some harsh and difficult language. 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 deeper 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 but only that Jesus cured the man and proclaimed that his sins were forgiven. Naturally the scribes reacted by accusing 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. Jesus later enraged that same group of puritans with his answer about eating grain in a wheat field on the Sabbath and fired them up even more so when he cured a man with a lame hand in the synagogue on a Sabbath. After those controversial episodes Jesus once again 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 this morning we join the story.

Before we can begin to recognize the grace that is here we need to deal with that uncomfortable unforgivable sin issue. The characteristic of ‘unforgivable’ is often not so much a cosmic absolute as it is a cultural relativism ... by that I mean that it is the social grouping that determines what is unforgivable. For example, from time to time I have been known to offer the wisdom that the only unforgivable sin for Anglicans (my wife Elizabeth is one) is bad taste, while the only unforgivable sin for Presbyterians is to mess with the money. Note here who the social group involved is ... 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 they are 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.

But still, why such a harsh rebuke from Jesus? It's dangerous to wander into speculating about motives, especially some two thousand years later. However, a couple of possibilities come to mind. One is that Jesus was tired of and frustrated by the dogged determination of the religious leaders to focus so intently upon the letter of the law to the point of smothering any grace, mercy, and justice. The continual use of the righteous to use religion to exclude, to alienate, and to oppress is a powerfully deadening force and would likely sap even the patience of Christ Jesus himself. But I also wonder if Jesus' harsh rebuke wasn't due at least in little part to a phenomenon to which young men are especially vulnerable, namely the rapid development of a "smart mouth" as they flex a newly-found sense of power. I suspect most of you might have experienced or at least witnessed this kind of behaviour, whether it was "lipping off" to a teacher, a boss, or parents. Might such a phenomenon explain not only Jesus' harsh response to the Scribes but also the difficult saying about his mother and brothers and sisters?

What then about that 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. More importantly, 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 Western in the sense of cowboys and the "Old West" but instead an unrealistic picture that has been conditioned by Norman Rockwell paintings. However, our family units today are not particularly tight and are easily split asunder by the growing sense of individualism that defines our culture. By contrast 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). As Jesus made the comment 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. Now this is not to say that Jesus abandoned 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 with his declaration "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" other than to a radical expansion of faith? Not a new definition of the human family but rather a vision 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 further 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 with this understanding not of the tearing apart of a family but a broadening of the definition into a connected clan of faith, 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? One of the answers to this comes from an e-book I have, “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?!”) Not that I am – or we are, for that matter normal people – but I resonate with the way Bowen develops an understanding of evangelism from the Gospel of John that incorporates 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 note the similarity of that understanding with what we read here 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 – form this new family of faithful people.

I note also the similarity with what we do here 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. I believe this is pretty close both to what Bowen proposes and what Jesus proclaims 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 counted as children of God. May we ever continue through the power of the Holy Spirit to bring glory to God in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.