

Jesus Isn't a Closet Guy

To be misunderstood is to be hurt. You know that truth deep down in your bones, as most of us have found ourselves in situations and settings that made us feel nearly alien, on the outside, not a part of the in-crowd, not even a part of the fringe crowd. Even when just a part of you isn't welcomed and affirmed, then *all* of you is excluded.

And it hurts. It hurts to know that there are folks out there who, when they see you, whisper words of cutting cruelty, or cross the street when you might meet on the sidewalk. It hurts to know that everybody else *except* you has been invited to take a seat at the table. What do you do when you feel this exclusion? What do you do when you feel the labels placed upon you, tamping down, crushing, negating you? Well, we know what Jesus did. *The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."*

In just three sentences, the drama, the conflict, is laid out and we feel its weight just as Jesus himself must have. By the scribes, those who spoke with religious authority, he was labeled a demon, a servant of the devil himself. This wouldn't have hurt Jesus. But they weren't the only ones to label and negate him. It wasn't just the scribes, Pharisees, or Roman authorities who wanted to silence the voice of the Lord. It was his family, too. His family, embarrassed by his radical ministry. His family, embarrassed by his words of liberation. His family, his very flesh and blood, wanted to hide him away because everyone else thought he was crazy, out of his

mind, ready to be restrained, cast out from the community, and shoved back into the closet of his family trade.

Notice Jesus' reply, or at least notice what's missing at first. He doesn't engage with the family that wanted to hide him away. He addressed the scribes and shot down the accusations of demonic possession. Even though the crowd brought him pain, even though his family had just delivered daggers to his heart, he stayed resolute. He knew his purpose, his identity, and he would not stand for the suggestion that he was driven by anything other than radical, self-giving love. No demons here, nothing that needed to be cut out or exorcised. Nothing that needed a conversion camp. He planted his foot firmly into the dirt, looked at everyone around him, and told them to step aside, for the kingdom was at hand and he was burdened with glorious purpose!

But you know that dig from his family hurt worse than anything that could come from the white-washed tombs of the scribes and Pharisees who were themselves constant thorns in his side. It wasn't them that threatened to break him. It was his family. It was the exclusion and shame heaped upon him that *might* have caused him to break, to shrink back, and to listen to all those voices that were telling him to be somebody he wasn't, that were telling him to be inauthentic, to hide his true self away. And this he simply could not abide!

*Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers? It was Jesus' turn to offer sharp words that could hurt like daggers. But can we blame him? Really and truly, can we blame the man for re-defining what family meant when his own family sought to violate his true self? For that's what occurred, a violation, a negation, an act of shame. But he had the courage to be himself, the courage to be true to his identity, and if something drastic was*

needed to prove the point, then he was more than capable of offering his own negation: *“And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”* Into the face of the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, Jesus re-directed their exclusion, their negation of him, and made it into an act of self-exclusion. By refusing to embrace Jesus for who he was, his family harmed themselves. They risked severing the connection with Jesus because they themselves could not accept him for who he truly was.

And in an act of holy, creative snark, Jesus re-defined what family meant.’ If you have been excluded, come join this new family and serve the living God. If you have felt the pain of insults, been denigrated and made less than, come here, child. Come here and receive the love of a Divine Parent who will never cause you harm for who you are, inside and out.’

And this is the Church’s mission, to follow this rabble-rousing rabbi who disrupted traditional ideas about family and declared that God was doing new things in their midst. It’s our mission to be a place that looks like this Jesus, a Jesus who was willing to tell the truth and had the courage to be himself in the face of exile or annihilation. It’s our calling to be a family like his new family, sisters, brothers, and siblings gathered around a common goal of changing the world so that we might see justice roll down like waters, to see the dams of grace and mercy break open and pour forth upon the face of the earth.

This means that we must strive, continually strive, to be a place where there are no outcasts, a church where everybody has a seat at the table, a family gathered together by the waters of baptism, a community rooted in our identities as beloved children of God, beautiful to behold. Here, we are called to create a safe space for those who have been harmed and vilified for who they love, or the color of their skin. This is a place where there are no locked closets,

where none are hidden away. This is a place where people can heal from the wounds of the world, being nourished by the love of Christ in this bread and wine. This is a place where people can be *proud* of who they are.