

Knowing Whose We Are

Mark 3:2-35

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Jesus does not fool around in Mark. He's always on the move, crowds are showing up at every turn, people are healed, demons are cast out, mercy and transformation happen, hope and excitement are spreading, and the Tall Steeple preachers and Big Boy politicians from Jerusalem show up and are scared. They're losing control! Things are happening and happening fast, so they had better do something, and do it now! They start a big public relations campaign saying Jesus works with the Devil. They're on television talk shows, on the radio, blogging, tweeting, and the pundits and talking heads keep repeating what they're fed: that Jesus secretly worships Satan, and the twitter and gossip and social media campaigns amplify the innuendo into more full-blown charges: he's a socialist, he's an outsider, he's a "DLR" (a "don't look right"), he's a terrorist, he's not normal, he's a part of a secret conspiracy... you get the idea.

Meanwhile, Jesus' family shows up to try to get him to shut up and get out of there. Reporters and TV crews are showing up at their house in Nazareth, neighbors are whispering and some won't speak to them. What in the sam-hill is Jesus doing? He was a brilliant young rabbi with a great future in front of him. If he had played his cards right, he could have ended up at one of the more prestigious synagogues in Galilee. But no! What's got into him? Is he having a mental breakdown, a psychotic episode? Or maybe delusional and grandiose thinking with all of these adoring crowds following him around? Or maybe paranoia over the religious leaders trying to get him?

Mark says Jesus' family shows up and tries to restrain him and get him out of there. The word "restrain" is the same word that will be used over in chapter 14 (v.46) when Mark says the mob and religious leaders "lay hands on him and arrest him."

Jesus is inside the crowded house, people everywhere, and one of the disciples yells over the crowd, "Your brothers and sisters, and your mother are outside waiting on you, calling for you" (v. 3:32).

He responds, "Who is my family? Anyone who does God's will, anybody who joins the God Movement, that's my family" (3:34-35).

Hmm... I don't know about you, but I think Jesus sounds a little rude to his mother and family. After all, they just walked twenty miles from Nazareth to try to rescue him. And in a time and culture, where family was the be-all and end-all, Jesus' words would be even more shocking then, than they are today.

For much of culture and family life of the first century, God, religion, family, and country were all pretty much one thing, all wrapped up in one another, entangled, mixed up where it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. In other words, they were enmeshed. Furthermore, the whole thing had become dysfunctional.

I know a pastor from a few years ago in another town in East Texas, who was run off from his church because he moved the American flag from up on the chancel to the back corner. The congregation did not pay attention to whether or

not he believed in the doctrine of the Trinity or believed the Nicene Creed or even if he preached the New Testament, but when it came to moving the flag, he was fired.

Biblically that's called idolatry. But it is also sick and dysfunctional. At least it is from the perspective of Jesus.

Jesus calls us to join a new family but in order to join a new family, one must detach from the old. Membership in God's kingdom, God's Movement is a joyful thing, but it also involves some relinquishment.

Have you ever thought about when Jesus walked along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and called Simon Peter, Andrew, and James and John, to drop their nets, leave their fishing business, and follow him, that he was breaking up the family fishing business? Jesus' invitation to hit the road with him broke the hearts of many first-century parents who were counting on the kids for help in their old age.

Jesus comes along and called his disciples, called all of us, to step away, separate ourselves from the sick system of God, nationalism, and family and join him in his Way, to participate in his new family of those who do God's will of loving neighbors as ourselves and loving enemies, of forgiveness, of mercy and grace, and healing, where those of us who were accustomed to being outcasts are now seated around God's Welcome Table, and where we discover that we are sitting next to all kinds of people from all kinds of nations, cultures, and families. And all of us are now in the Family of God.

What happens when someone steps up and answers Jesus' call to follow him, we wash them in water – baptism – which says, among other things, that the person has been reborn, is starting over, and has been adopted into a new God-formed family. The person gets a new name, “Christian,” that takes precedence over that person's family name. It is as if the person has already died to old attachments and former relationships and has already been raised to new life. And the church is that fresh, new family that is composed of those who have heard Jesus' “Follow me” and have stepped forward and said “Yes.” One of the most central things we do in worship isn't some mysterious, dark, esoteric rite. It's a family meal with everyone around the table, the Sunday dinner that we call the Lord's Supper, or Holy Communion, or the Eucharist. It is family as God intended family to be.

Notice that Jesus did not break all ties with his family of origin and he did not hate his culture or country. What he did was separate himself from the sick and idolatrous, from the dysfunction and in so doing, he changed the system. For example, we know in John 19 (v.25-27), that standing at the foot of the cross was Mary, his mother and alongside of her was his aunt, Mary's sister. And from the cross Jesus directed his mother's care to the young disciple John. We also know from the book of Acts that Jesus' brother James was an active leader in the early church. There is also New Testament evidence of more brothers and Matthew and Mark mention that he had sisters, as well.

Systems thinking, including family systems, says that changing one part of a system may affect other parts or the whole system. We don't cut off all connections with family or culture (as if we could) but we do differentiate ourselves. We get some distance. In other words, I wonder that when Jesus

separated himself and began the new family of God, the rest of his family changed too? They ended up joining up, as well.

We also know among his disciples were Matthew a tax collector, someone who had been enmeshed in the Roman tax system as well as a disciple named Simon the Zealot, which meant he had been fighting for the violent overthrow of the Romans. We know Nicodemus, a bedrock pillar of the Jerusalem religious/political establishment, was born again and became a member. And in the book of Acts, there were women and men, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles and on and on – all joining God’s new family.

Hanging on that cross, Jesus shows us what God’s new family looks like more clearly than anywhere else. With his arms stretched wide he includes his mother and gives her care over to young John. But also, his arms stretch wide including a thief to join him that very day in paradise. Who else but Jesus would parade into Paradise arm-in-arm with a criminal rejected by the world?

Today, we prepare for our family meal, Holy Communion. And in days to come, we will regather around pot-lucks and fellowship suppers, and more Holy Communion. During the week, some of us will be serving meals or providing groceries to impoverished and homeless people. Around town there will be some people who will look at this odd family called Austin Heights and say, “Jesus is hanging out with the same reprobates and cast-offs that got him crucified in the first place.”

And we say, “Thanks be to God.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.