

Homily: June 9, 2024, Proper 5: The Third Sunday after Pentecost
St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Appomattox, VA
Mark 3:20-35
The Rev. David W. Perkins, Th.D.

Sir Lawrence Olivier's wife quoted him as having said. "**Behind every family's front door there is a slaughterhouse.**" @

This well may be an exaggeration—a hyperbole—but its shocking vividness prompts a knowing nod. Family and dysfunctional are a word pair in our culture—high divorce rates, emotional and physical and sexual abuse, child abuse and neglect, hidden rage, family counseling demands—all remind us that the family can be a very unsafe emotional space.

Some people keep calling us back to a “biblical” practice of family, a solution to our current woes that bemuses and amuses me. Today's Gospel is one of the reasons. Jesus' mother and brothers stand outside the house where he's teaching intent on seizing him by force and taking him home because they believe he has a demon and has gone crazy. They are “outside” in more ways than one—out of touch with who Jesus is and what he's about. Families can be that way.

The Myth of Family

We sometimes hear that the family is the place of love—the place where loving relationships nurture wholeness. That certainly can be and sometimes is the case. But, it also is the case that the reverse happens. Consider Abraham leaving Hagar and his child Ishmael in the desert with one bag of water. Consider Joseph's brothers selling him into slavery and telling their father Jacob that he was dead. Consider King David's son, Absalom, rebelling against him and seeking his life. And, then, there's Jesus' family.

We hear some saying that there is a “biblical” pattern for the family—the husband as head and in charge. In fact, no such pattern really exists. There are biblical examples of the reverse and the approach to reading some of the passages these people use could be questioned. Rebecca seems more in charge in that family than Isaac. Which of the biblical families listed above would you like to be part of? How about Jesus' family?

Consider Jesus in today's Gospel—being demonized by his family because they

were blinded by familiarity to his ministry of teaching and preaching and their significance. Can you imagine how abandoned and alone and distressed someone as loving as was he must have felt? He did what we all are called to do—maintain our commitment to God, even if it disrupts family relationships.

Mark begins this story and interrupts it with the story of those accusing Jesus of doing miracles in Satan's power. Then, Mark continues the family episode. He is telling us that the two stories inform each other. In this instance Jesus' family has more in common with Jesus' adversaries, who also think he has a demon.

They were so close to each other but did not really "see" each other. We would do well to put a question mark behind our perceptions of those closest to us. Are we really seeing them. Stanley Kunitz, American poet spoke in an interview about his relationship to his mother.

"My mother has become closer to me in recent years. I understand her more than I did in the beginning. There were two strong wills in that household, hers and mine, so that our natural tensions were magnified. We held each other at a distance. She was the most competent woman I have ever known—I respected that. But it took years—after her death at eighty-six—for me to be touched by the beauty and bravery of her spirit." #

An Alternative Family

Jesus responds to the request of his family to come outside by remaining inside and asking a question. "Who is my mother and who are my brothers?" Can we ask a similar question? Who is our real family? Is family defined only by blood? By descent?

Then, he makes a startling statement that redraws the boundaries of family. Jesus looked around the room and said, "Look. My mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will are my mother, my brothers and my sisters." For Jesus, that meant his disciples, the women who traveled with and supported him; Mary, Martha, Lazarus, etc. Have you considered this? That Jesus considers himself your brother. That Jesus considers you his brother, sister, or mother?

Family can be redefined by the linkages of faith, discipleship, and service. What a revolutionary concept, one we've barely touched the edges of. Even an atheist like Alain de Botton in his book *Religion for Atheists* admires liturgical worship for its power to create a sense of shared humanity and community, esp. with the common meal.

Possibilities abound for creating alternative family—single parents and their children finding support in the church; gay and lesbian people enjoying extended family; small groups that develop closeness and mutual support; finding love and acceptance, warts and all, that may have been lacking in the family of origins. And, not allowing family ties to weaken or deter us from our commitment to God.

However, may I offer a word of caution. We cannot simply write off dysfunctional family and its members because of their misunderstandings of us or their destructive behavior. Only in cases of physical abuse, where one is in danger, would it seem wise to disappear. To cut people off creates immeasurable wounds and intergenerational scars. There are exceptions, of course).

Jesus did not give up on his family. Eventually, at least Mary, his mother, and one brother, James came around and were disciples. We must walk the painful path of speaking the truth to those who misunderstand and misuse us while maintaining connection and being every hopeful.

My experience—a teen who could not use his car on Sundays because my parents did not want me to be a minister. They preferred I go to medial school. Little did they know that my Baptist deacon grandfather, Delta, was doing more than taking me to church with him. He was taking me to supply preaching appointments. That all changed by the time I received my doctorate from seminary.

We must remember that how we relate to family is how we relate to God within them. Walter Kaufmann puts this very well. **"God is present when I confront You. But if I look away from You, I ignore (God) him. As long as I merely experience or use you, I deny God. But when I encounter You I encounter (God) Him."** §

My Invitation to You

We need the connections that family can and should give. We must find them in the larger community of shared belief in God and of shared mission, as well as maintaining our connections with biological family and hoping for transformation in those relationships without compromising our values or commitment.

The community can provide a safe alternative family space for all of us. And, we do have Jesus as our brother, one who understands the pain of family

misunderstanding and resistance.

Opening lines of Rilke's poem "The Man Watching"
**I can tell by the way the trees beat, after
 so many dull days, on my worried windowpanes
 that a storm is coming,
 and I hear the far-off fields say things
 I can't bear without a friend,
 I can't love without a sister. %**

Notes

@Sir Lawrence Olivier, quoted by his wife, NBC Today Show, Oct 25, 1990

#Stanley Kunitz, "Stanley Kunitz: The Art of Poetry No. 29." Interviewed by Chris Busa. *The Paris Review* 83: Spring 1982.

\$Walter Kaufmann, "I and You: A Prologue," in Martin Buber, *I and Thou*. A New Translation with a Prologue "I and You" and Notes by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribner's, 1970), p. 28.

%*Selected Poems of Rainer Maria Rilke*. A Translation from the German and Commentary by Robert Bly (New York: Harper, 1981), pp. 104-107