Things that Matter: The Power of Family

I Samuel 8: 4-11, 16-20

Mark 3: 20-35

*[These notes are intended for distribution as a worship aid. The notes may differ from the actual sermon as it is delivered. May God’s Spirit use these notes and the words that accompany them for goodness and grace – JLA]*

A long time ago my mother and father were having a family dinner. My grandmother was going to be there and he daughter-in-law, my aunt, and one of her daughters, my cousin. My parents were strong Christians – Baptists by denomination. My Dad had done volunteer medical missions before they were common and my Mom was very involved in the mission organization of the church. We didn’t talk a lot of politics or even religion at the dinner table.

At the time, I was in graduate school and this was in my season of being an Episcopalian – and before Vicki and I were married. My grandmother was a fundamentalist Baptist who did not think well of my faith journey. My aunt, a recent widow, and her husband had been involved in all sorts of churches and causes. Many of them were strident and controversial. Recently they had converted to Mormonism. My grandmother did not approve. Before his death my uncle would bait his other and try to convert her. It didn’t work.

So we were having this family dinner. I remember thinking about 15 minutes before they were to arrive – *what are we going to talk about?* Politics and religion would be off the table. Sure wouldn’t be sex. Oh my.

What do you talk about with family when you don’t want to talk about politics, religion or sex? We talked about family. It happened that my cousin had been doing some family history and genealogy as part of her new found Mormon faith. It was in the days before Ancestry.com so it was pretty daunting research. She had found out a lot and she shared it without the intention of conversion. Turns out that when you talk about family you end up talking about politics, religion and sex.

In a sense I look to that dinner conversation was a kind of baptism for me. It allowed me to enter into my family in a way that I had never thought about before. It introduced me to saints and sinners from whom I had descended. Since then I have realized that this mass of relationships was not just about what I had received. It was also about what I had to pass on – certainly within my biological family. And also in all the other places where I have found myself – in work and community. And sometimes we even impact others in ways we do not know. That is baptism – introduction to a family, and a world, of connection and meaning that is greater than we know.

The Old Testament story of the children of Israel demanding of their judge Samuel that he find a king may be an example of how a “family” decision can go wrong. Samuel reminds them that the Lord has given them plenty of opportunity for what won’t work. But they insist on moving forward. Of course as it was without a kind there would be no David nor would there be a messianic line that the prophets in exile could hold on to. Of course we can play too many “what if” games – yet somehow God used what was given. There is a power in “family.”

We look to family to deal with anxiety in the world. I felt it that night facing an uncertain family conversation. The children of Israel felt it as they looked around at the other kingdoms and wanted a king like everyone else had.

The gospel account of Jesus going home is yet another example of confronting anxiety in family and community. One way to read these verses seem to be a rebuff from Jesus of his family. There is no Christmas story in Mark’s gospel. He begins right out of the box: the prophet Isaiah prophesied, John the Baptist announced and Jesus was baptized – boom!

Jesus’ family is mentioned only here is Mark’s gospel. And the other gospels don’t mention any brothers of Jesus. Though tradition holds there was James, the brother of Jesus, who was a leader of the church in Jerusalem. Some Christians think that James was a son of Joseph from another marriage or a cousin. But Mark’s account is very early on in Jesus’ ministry.

But this account is not about being pro-family or not. When Jesus was on the cross, John’s gospel tells us that Mary, the mother of Jesus along with 2 other women were there. Jesus said to her: *Woman, here is your son.* [John 19: 26-27]. It is a tender moment.

These gospel accounts from Mark and John - are not just about the family. They are about following God’s will. Families of course can help us live into God’s will. And families are larger than our biological stock.

It is in the families where we grow up that we learn so much about life. These relationships shape us as we learn values and hope. Yes, family includes genetic material we carry. And it also contains relationships of adoption – formal and legal as well as informal and emotional. We learn stories and traditions and practices from these emotional connections of “family.”

Just before the reading for today, is Mark’s account of Jesus calls the disciples. As the CEB renders it:

*He appointed them to be with him, to be sent out to preach, 15and to have authority to throw out demons.*

Those he calls are not from the first rank of society. They are folks from the fringes. But they are a group with which he identifies. Jesus expands the definition of family. It is not just biology or sociology that creates a family. It is the willingness to do the will of God.

Wonderful! But if someone asked you – what does it mean to do the will of God?

Last week we listened to the story from the beginning of Mark 3. Jesus healed a man with a withered hand and said to him – *stretch out your hand.* I asked you to stretch out your hand to feel the possibilities of life there. There can be some sense of the vitality God give and Jesus shares with us. Part of doing the will of God is stretching out our hands in moments when we are in need.

Micah’s prophecy in the Old Testament has an oft quoted verse: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with your God.* [Micah 6;8]

When Jesus was asked what the great commandment was he replied by quoting Deuteronomy and Leviticus: *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself.* [Mt 22: 37-39].

In the Sermon on the Mount from Matthew’s gospel Jesus taught:

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.* [Matthew 5: 43-45].

Following the will of God comes back to the love of God. Sounds so simple. But it is not. As followers of Jesus we understand this love of God through who Jesus was and what Jesus did. Jesus did not reject family. But he did have some hard things to say to those of his “family” – both the biological group and the faith group. There is something about following God’s will that makes all the difference in the world. And it can take us to unexpected places. And bring out unexpected and unknown strengths.

In church we seek to follow Jesus. We have sacraments – visible signs of invisible graces – that are markers of our connection. Last week we did that with communion. The other sacrament is baptism – since I’ve been with you there have been several and there will be others soon. Baptism is a doorway into the family of faith. All families have their ways of welcoming new ones into that community. For Christians, that is baptism.

Will Willimon is a Methodist preacher, theologian and bishop. He tells a story about attending a men’s breakfast one week early on in his ministry. He asked for prayer for that day because a church member, a young man, a teenager really, had been arrested for DUI. Willimon was on his way to the jail to visit the young man. Immediately one of the men said:

*Preacher how bout me going with you. I know a whole lot more about alcohol abuse than you do.*

Then another man said *I’ll go too.* And then another. 4 go to the jail. They ask to see the young man. They are led in a labyrinth of cells. There was a 17 yr old huddled in a corner weeping.

Willimon said something like: *just want you to know we’re here for you.*

One of the men moved the preacher aside and said: *Son, come over here. How much is your bail?*

The young man said – *a couple of thousand dollars.*

The man said – *Awright. We’ll get that done.*

The other man said: *Son, how long have you been an alcoholic?*

The young man replied: *I don’t think I’m an alcoholic.*

To which the man said: *Okay*. *Let me rephrase that. How long have you been lying about being an alcoholic?* He continued: *I may not know a lot about a lot of things in life. But I know about this illness because I learned it the hard way. And I can help you escape. Come home with me. We have an extra room at the house and we will put this thing back together.*

Willimon was astounded at what he had seen. He said to those men *– this is baptism. Today God has used you to teach me the deeper meaning of what we do every time we receive any one into this family*.[[1]](#endnote-1)

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1. William Willimon, June 6, 2018. “Jesus Family Values.”

   <https://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/9046/jesus-family-values> [↑](#endnote-ref-1)