

Who is Our Family?

I speak to you today in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us to expand the family of those who know and love and do God's will.

Good morning! I'm happy to speak to you today, on the heels of the Strawberry Festival. Congratulations on a great event! I was glad to be a part of it. One thing, in particular, really impressed me. And that was how you, as a worshipping community, open your doors, reach out, invite and welcome in the broader neighborhood, enlarging the circle of friendship through this event. I'm interested to see how you build on that engagement and deepen those connections. And it is through this lens - invitation, engagement, connection - inclusiveness, in short - that I want to explore the Gospel reading today.

Today's passage from Mark starts on a somber note. It begins by foreshadowing the deadly nature of the coming clash between Jesus and the religious authorities. In the first chapters of Mark's Gospel, before today's passage, Jesus launches his ministry in Galilee with a bang. He casts out many demons and heals Peter's mother-in-law, a leper, the paralytic and the man with the withered hand. He teaches with authority - and attracts the attention of the authorities. He and his disciples have also broken social taboos and religious laws - eating with tax collectors, not fasting as required, gleaning grain and healing the sick on the Sabbath. Even forgiving sins! Jesus' growing reputation as healer and teacher attracts great multitudes from all around the region - so great, Mark tells us, that Jesus and the disciples cannot escape the crowds even to eat.

But Jesus' behavior and growing popularity mark him as major troublemaker for the religious establishment. The Pharisees and Herodians are already conspiring to destroy him, angry that he is challenging the religious laws and undercutting their authority. And in this passage, the scribes, allies of the Pharisees, ominously, hurry down from the heights of Jerusalem to the lowlands of Galilee to add their voice to the campaign to discredit Jesus. The scribes use an old authoritarian trick - they seek to destroy Jesus by dehumanizing him, by literally demonizing him, in the people's eyes. They spread the accusation that Jesus is possessed and that his miracles are done through demonic powers, "casting out demons by the power of demons."

Jesus' family, understandably, is alarmed. They hear the stories circulating, that people are saying Jesus is "out of his mind," a first century synonym for demonic possession. And they hasten to where he is staying, but can't get to him through the crowds. When told that his mother, brothers and sisters await him outside, Jesus asks, disconcertingly, "who are my mother and my brothers?"

We could read Jesus' words as a chilling, even a harsh, rejection of his family. Such a rejection would astonish first century listeners because in Jesus' time, the family, the extended family, was everything. People did not see themselves as having individual identities as we understand them today. People's identities, and their lives, were communal, defined by and dependent upon their relations to others. Family ties defined economics - sons took their father's

trade. Family ties defined religion and politics - priests were drawn only from priestly families, kings' and senators' sons succeeded them in government. Marriage within families was preferred. Not only people's identities but their physical survival, their very health and life, depended on being part of a family in the first century. In this context it is easy to see why loyalty to the family was the fundamental value in the culture of the time, and why a seeming rejection of family would jolt listeners, and seize their attention.

But I think that Jesus in this passage is not so much rejecting *his* family as he is, in one stroke, dramatically re-defining, for his first century listeners, the all important concept *of* family - and especially, the nature of the ties that bind people together.

“Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looking at those sitting around him, the sick, the poor, the possessed and the dispossessed - but seekers all - Jesus says, “*here* are my mother and my brothers.” And then, crystal clear, he says “whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus is including, not excluding - enlarging the circle of “family.”

Jesus is telling them, and us, that our true family is not those bound to us by blood or legal ties, or by race, tribe, nationality or ethnicity, by economic or social station. Our true family, Jesus says, are those who do the will of God. We are bound together as one, in a community, as a family, not just by a shared understanding of *what* constitutes God's will, but because we *do* God's will. The emphasis is on action.

And we know what God's will is. We must love God, and we must love our neighbor as ourselves. And it is in not just believing this, but in doing it, that we advance God's intention for the world - which is justice.

This passage is very relevant for our lives today as members of the Christian family. It is no secret that we are living in a time when divisiveness and hate seem to be gaining the upper hand, revealing dangerous fissures in our society. It is a time when the demonization, vilification and rejection of “the other” has become routine - a strategy, sadly, legitimated by our leaders, and emulated and viciously deployed through social media by anyone with a grievance against another. We may not have built a wall on our southern border - happily - but the walls of hate and vituperativeness are growing so high in our society today that more and more people cannot, will not, even speak to those who hold views that differ from theirs. What, in such times, would Jesus want us to do?

Certainly, Jesus would want us to join with others in our true family, the community which shares our values of love and inclusiveness. He would want us to reaffirm those values, strongly, in the face of an onslaught of hate and lies - as some 3,000 people did at the Reclaiming Jesus vigil held in D.C. on May 24, or as many others did at the Pride Parade yesterday, or even as we do today and every Sunday with our presence here.

But that is the easy part. I don't think Jesus would want us to stop there. On the contrary, I think Jesus would want us - each one individually, and all together as a community - to take a

next, and admittedly much harder, step to do God's will. And that is, to actively reach out - with real love, the intention of reconciliation and the aim of inclusion - to reach out and seek to establish connections *across* divides, with those, especially, who *don't* think like we do. Connections through which we then work to enlarge the family as Jesus defined it, the family of those who know, love and do God's will.

Perhaps you have heard of local musician Daryl Davis or seen him perform. I met Daryl when he spoke recently at St. John's Norwood. Daryl is the son of an American diplomat from Potomac. He grew up all around the world, and ultimately became an R&B and blues musician. He played and learned with the greats, including B.B. King, Chuck Berry and Jerry L. Lewis. He is also an African American, a Christian, and an impressive and recognized leader in race relations. Daryl is known specifically for his amazing work befriending Klu Klux Klansmen and convincing them to abandon and denounce the Klan.

Daryl got his start in this vocation in 1983, when he was playing piano in a bar in Frederick. A white patron approached and complimented him, saying it was the first time he had ever "heard a black man play as well as Jerry Lee Lewis." Daryl did a double take at that, but then suggested they have drink so he could explain to this gentleman how Jerry Lee Lewis, a friend of Daryl's, had in fact learned to play from leading black blues and boogie woogie pianists. The man was skeptical at first but finally agreed, and then admitted over the drink that he had never had a drink with a black man before because he was a member of the KKK. Daryl didn't believe him until the man pulled his KKK membership card out of his wallet and showed it to him. To make a long story short, these two unlikely drinking partners became friends, and Daryl, motivated by an urge to understand "why do you hate me when you know nothing about me," launched his outreach to Klan members with the help of his new friend. Since then, Daryl has been directly or indirectly involved with over 200 people leaving the Klan. Often, they have given him their capes and hoods as a sign of their profound change of heart. Daryl's guiding philosophy is simple: "Establish dialogue. When two enemies are talking, they're not fighting."

Daryl's work with the Klan is not easy work. Indeed, at times it is dangerous. You can read about it online, or watch a documentary on Daryl's work called *Accidental Courtesy* on YouTube, or even invite him to come and speak at Redeemer. It isn't easy work, but Daryl is bridging an enormous divide, making connections and enlarging the circle - the family - of those who know and love and do God's will. He is doing God's work.

This is just one inspiring example of one individual who didn't hunker down behind walls of hate and fear, but had the courage to reach out and seek to dismantle them. I am sure you know of others. You may also be involved in the crucial work of reconciliation and healing. The good news is that such work is going on. But I am sure you would also agree that there is great scope today, indeed, an urgent need, for so much more. How can we, as a community, contribute to the great work of engagement, connection, reconciliation and healing where our divisions are greatest today - and help expand the family of those who know and love and do God's will?
Amen

