

“WHO ARE MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHERS?”

Mark 3:33-35

This is a story about one of Jesus' first forays into public life. A young man leaves his family for the first time and, on his own, tests out his own way of dealing with the world. The simplicity of Jesus' presence is so well described by John putting into the mouth of the onlookers what they thought was the ultimate put-down. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose Father and mother we know?" Jesus, the carpenter's son, set out to talk about, and to act upon, his understanding of God. The result appears to have been success embedded within a public relations disaster. Those whom he helped were elated, but in the process he upset the establishment – the local religious leaders. He may have talked about the sovereignty of God, he may have helped the helpless – but he did it by ignoring those whose duty it was to talk about God, and by disobeying the strict religious duties that were meant to support and maintain the importance of the religious law.

Jesus was in trouble. The young man on his early mission to the poor and the diseased had trodden on some very important toes. What Mark's story, then, seems to suggest is that the people in charge decided to send for his Mother so that she could set him straight. What better than to call in the family to put the son of Joseph back on the straight and narrow again. That was the most natural thing to do.

It is natural to call in the family in a troublesome situation because we think of the family as the primary supportive group in our lives. It is a group forged in blood relationship – the relationship of birth. We are born with very little protection against the environment and the world about us, with only a few embedded instincts to propel us through life. Nurture within a secure setting is important for us as infants. The bonds that grow between the child and those that are there to provide the nurturing – most often the mother and the father – become binding for life.

This bonding within the family, between Mother, father, brothers and sisters, is the basis of a feeling of unity, of oneness that exists within the family. There is within this oneness a shared sense of common interest and common concern. It is this shared concern that envelopes everything within a family and takes precedence over all else. This is why families close ranks against those who oppose any one of them. It is also why families take issue against anyone who criticizes any one of its members.

It is this security we find within the family that brings us a shared commitment that is shown most clearly in the loving relationships we find binding families together. This is not love in the debased MTV sense. Love in the best sense implies an absence of barriers between individuals. In families at their best – and certainly in the healthy family – barriers do not exist. All for one and one for all means that there is a deep and abiding sense of security between individuals – and that security only exists between people who have nothing to fear from each

other. Where there is love there is openness and honesty that holds people together. It is this security of love that exists within the family.

We had a Christmas card a few years ago from an artist friend. The picture on the card was of a pen and ink drawing of her husband holding their new born child in his arms. The image of love that the picture portrayed was both in the protective grasp of the father's arms about the child and in the look of oneness that was in the father's eyes. This child, he seemed to be saying, is flesh of my flesh and blood of my blood, and in that look was the recognition that whatever befell these two in the future the child was secure in the father's commitment to her. On Wednesday we saw the wonderful picture of Euna Lee, one of the reporters released from North Korea, being united with her daughter Hana. In that picture one saw the deep relationship of mother and daughter.

Is not this Joseph's son? We know Joseph, we know the family, we know where Jesus comes from so why does he taunt us so? And so mother was sent for. Surely she will put some sense into his head!

But what is Jesus' response? He said something on this occasion when his family comes to rescue him from this early encounter with the world and its officialdom which can cause us to wonder. In fact we pause and ask if we are hearing him properly. Here the establishment tells him to go to listen to some sense from his mother and his brothers who surely would have the common sense to see the trouble he is getting into. But how does Jesus respond? He asks the pointed question – But who are my mothers and my brothers? Who is my family?

Was Jesus throwing to one side the family within which he was nurtured? Did he really disown his mother? Was Jesus so cynical about those who nurtured and sustained him in his youth? I don't think that is what is going on here and this is not what Mark wants us to take from this incident. What Mark wants us to grasp and understand is not that Jesus was rejecting his family, putting his mother down, as it were, in the imperious use of his power: but Marks wants us to see that Jesus' vision of family is extended beyond the bloodlines of a natural birth group. Jesus claims that there is an extended set of family relationships that goes far beyond the tightly knit unit of mother, father, brothers and sisters.

The walls of the family do not circumscribe our relationships with each other. The walls of our earthly family have been broken down by the force of a larger commitment – our common commitment to God. The fear of difference, the fear of others outside our ken is done away with when we see ourselves united with others in a common bond of witness to God's will.

When they conquered Britain, the Romans were able to get as far north as what we now think of as the border between England and Scotland. There they encountered the Picts from the north, barbarians who mounted constant raids upon their supply lines. So their commander, Hadrian, built a wall to keep the Romans secure. This wall meant to keep the invaders out is still there and stretches from coast to coast – Hadrian's Wall. It is a fascinating place to visit. A

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HAMILTON
AUGUST 9, 2009

much greater engineering feat some centuries later is the Great Wall of China, which stretches majestically along the northern border of China which was built to keep out the Mongolian hordes. In the same way we build barriers between ourselves and those who are different from ourselves.

What Jesus is saying to us is that the natural walls of security that exists around families have to be extended. The source of the unity of this extended family is not in the natural relationship in blood and flesh, but in the common relationship to God, in the unity of the oneness, and God's love with its sense of security and sense of belonging. "Whoever does the will of God are my mother, and my brother, and my sister."

So the feeling of oneness in this new family lies in the shared commitment to the will of God and that will is made clear to us in the caring and concern He has for mankind. When we love our neighbor we express that commitment to His will. It is in this common commitment to the will of God that we find the security of knowing that God is present within the work of this new family, this new community. The security that comes to us comes from the awareness that God has acted in Jesus to bring His love to us on earth, and that this love demonstrated at Calvary is a force that is always present for us. In carrying out God's will we perpetuate in our lives the presence of God's activity here and now. We become secure in the knowledge that what we do in our lives is done with God's claim upon us. Acting in the spirit of God's command we are secure in the knowledge that our lives cannot be separated from Him, whatever the outcome. Our security does not rely upon some barrier constructed by us to keep others out of our lives, but rests in the inner knowledge that our lives rest upon the heartbeat of God in our working out His will in the world. In the words of the hymnist:

In heavenly love abiding
No change my heart shall fear
And safe is such confiding
For nothing changes here.

I am reminded of another family story that Jesus told – the story of the Prodigal Son. What is so important about this story of the wayward son leaving home, and then returning without hope of being reaccepted as a son, is that he is accepted as his father's son. While in despair he decides to return home. He practices what he is going to say: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands." But the Father greets him with open arms: "This son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!" The familial bond of love is always there and it is open to us. This is the wonder of God's love; we are never cast out of the bond of love. We need only to know that we are accepted within the family of God.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH HAMILTON
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Such a security resting in the will and love of God is linked with the presence of a long history of witnesses to the working out of that will in human history. We have continuity with the past, and are connected to the eternal love of God, and in that sense “nothing changes here.” We are tied to a history and we belong not simply to our churches at this time, but to the longer past of God’s relationship to us. We are tied to those who have witnessed throughout the ages to the Death and resurrection of our Lord and even beyond that to God’s revealing witness in the prophets of the first covenant.

And so we have a deep feeling of belonging that sustains us and keeps us within its grasp as we work out that witness in our own lives. That witness in our lives lies in our response to his love of us. The command of God is that we love as He has loved us. As we witness to that demand in our lives and in our own loving response to that demand in the day to day activities of our lives we testify to our belonging to a family.

The commitment to this demand of love is possible because Jesus has brought us into his family, and he can claim us as his mother, brothers and sisters. He does not reject Mary, but accepts us as he accepted her.

A prayer:

We come to you, our Father, like children needing to be loved and comforted. Reassure us with your love. Give us a new confidence that you are always with us. Give us courage and hope to be your faithful servants, bringing healing and love to a world so burdened with pain and hopelessness, and in the doing of it may we be better than we are: through Christ our Lord. Amen.

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