

Family: Painfully Difficult Good News

A sermon on Mark 3:20-35 by Nathan Nettleton, 6 June 2021

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Jesus's radical call to align ourselves with his new family trumps even our allegiances to our blood families, and asks us to shape our relationships in the church around a shared commitment to living out the will of God.

Sermon

We often tend to think of Jesus as someone who was so unfailingly loving and kind and respectful and polite that no one who met him could fail to be irresistibly drawn to him, and there is some truth in that picture. But it is also true that he had a definite knack of pissing people off mightily, and the gospel writers don't hide that from us.

In Mark's gospel, Jesus already has the religious and political leaders plotting to kill him by the beginning of the third chapter, but it was often the ordinary people too. Before long we will hear of his home townfolk in Nazareth getting angry enough to want to kill him, and over in John's gospel, we hear that even many of his followers decided after a while that what he was asking was too much, and they gave up on him and went their own ways (John 6:60-66). In the reading we heard tonight, we have the religious leaders again denouncing him as being in league with the devil, and his own immediate family, his mother and brothers, concluding that he had lost his mind and needed to be stopped.

His own family. Mark portrays them here as being in league with the religious leaders in opposing Jesus's ministry and trying to put an end to it.

But the even bigger shock, if we have the courage to actually hear it instead of holding our hands over our ears and pretending it never happened, is the answer Jesus gives. We, in this congregation, have often been happy to note that Jesus doesn't give much support to the self-proclaimed advocates of traditional family values, and that's true. But actually, Jesus is just as hard on the way most of us tend to think and feel about our families. And if I manage in the next fifteen minutes to preach faithfully what he actually said and meant, most of you will be deeply offended. Deeply. Jesus had a knack for pissing people off, and we don't get exempted.

During the week, in the chat after one of our daily prayer liturgies, someone was telling a story that involved being interrupted from something by the sudden call of grandparent duties. And grandparent duties, they told us, trump everything. Rough translation – family trumps everything.

I totally get that. I'm not picking on the person who said it, because any of us could have said it. I come from a pretty dysfunctional family of origin, and feel no great ties to them, but now I have a family of my own, and I totally get that feeling that those ties trump everything. I'll drop pretty much anything without a second thought if Margie or Acacia need something urgently. I don't have any grandchildren, but I can imagine how smitten I'd be if I did, and how strongly I'd feel that they trumped every other call on my life.

But Jesus is standing before me here in the gospels saying, "Really, Nathan? Your family trumps everything? Then *you* are not ready to be my disciple."

This is the same Jesus who, according to Luke (9:57-62), refuses two would-be followers who ask leave to go and make sure things were okay for their families before joining him on the road. “No one who puts a hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God,” he says. Like I said, Jesus had a knack for pissing people off, and his tendency to be totally uncompromising about our allegiances, especially the allegiances that everybody takes for granted are sacred, was a big part of it.

Now for those of you who think I’m exaggerating or overstating this, and that’s probably most of you, try this little exercise for a moment. Try imagining yourself into the story we heard in tonight’s gospel reading. If you have adult children, then imagine that one of your adult children is in trouble. If you don’t have adult children, but you have brothers or sisters or even parents who you love dearly, then imagine that one of them is in some kind of serious trouble. They have somehow got themselves surrounded by people who are exploiting them horribly. They’re not eating properly, they’re not getting enough sleep, it’s just non stop. And now you are hearing that your loved one is on the verge of a breakdown and desperately needs help. So you gather the family and race to get there to rescue your loved one. You are full of love and concern and the best of intentions. Are you getting into that feeling?

Good. Now picture yourself on arrival. You rush to your loved one, saying “We’re your family. We’re here to help, to get you out of this mess.” And your loved one, your beloved child or sibling, looks at you and says, “Family? You’re not my family. This is my family, my new mother, brothers, sisters, these lot in here.”

Are you feeling it? It hurts, doesn’t it? It hurts badly. You were there with genuine concern to help a loved one, one of your own. And what happened? They disowned you, out loud, in public. Flat out disowned you. “You’re not my family. This is my family, these people who you don’t even know.”

If you can hear that, and really feel the pain of that, then you are beginning to grasp the impact of this story, because that is exactly what Jesus said and did to his mother and brothers in this story. There is no wriggle room. There is no way to put a nice spin on it. There are no alternative interpretations or hidden cultural context issues that allow us to soften what Jesus said and make it comfortable and domesticated.

The only way the majority of Christians live with this without feeling offended and heartbroken by it is to flat out ignore it. We do that by focussing all our attention instead on the thing he said after he disowned his family: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” We can live with that line okay. Taken on its own, that line tells us that we can hugely extend our family and gain a whole bunch more mothers and sisters and brothers. We’re okay with that, so we domesticate this story by focussing only on that and totally ignoring the fact that Jesus is saying that the vast majority of us will actually have to choose. It’s family duties trump everything else, or following Jesus trumps everything else, and you probably can’t have it both ways.

If I’m understanding Jesus right here, I think he’d be saying that the only way you could have both is if your blood family members are so committed to following Jesus that they’d be willing to disown you rather than compromise their following of Jesus to please you. Or in other words, if you are fair dinkum about following Jesus, the only way you get to keep regarding your blood relatives as members of your all-important, trumps everything, primary

family is if they are defined as family wholly and solely by their practice of doing the will of God.

Even then, for those of us who might be lucky enough to have that little out-clause in our favour, I still don't think the message is actually comfortable for us, having been reared as we have been in an idolatry-of-family culture, because that is still a major rethink of those relationships that is being asked of us.

Take me and Acacia for example. I think that what Jesus is telling me here is that if I am serious about following him in doing God's will, and therefore serious about my primary family being his family which is defined, not by blood, but by doing God's will, then Acacia is no longer part of my primary family as my daughter, but as my sister. And not a trumps-all-other-sisters sister, but one of many sisters who I am equally called to love. I can still say that Acacia is family and I'd lay down my life for her if I had to, but I have to be willing to say that and mean it about other sisters here like Merryl and Liesl and Suzanne just as much.

This actually follows on directly from something I mentioned in last Sunday's sermon. I spoke about how the Apostle Paul speaks of us being adopted into God's family, and that Jesus pushes the idea even further and says that we are born again, not just adopted but actually born, into God's family as Jesus's brothers and sisters. The Church has always taught that we are born from the waters of baptism, and when Acacia was born from the waters of baptism, I wasn't the father. She and I were both born from the waters of baptism with the same father, the God and Father of our brother Jesus.

Now that's actually quite unsettling to think through in that way, but part of what it tells us is that this concept of our fellow Jesus-followers being our new family is not just a fluffy feel-good way of looking at one another in the church. It is actually a fundamental literal truth about what it means to be the church, to be born again into a new family with God as our father and mother. And, though unsettling, it is actually very good news.

In a society where our concept of family has grown more and more dangerously small and nuclear and insular, Jesus's invitation to join him in a family where we will have parents and sisters and brothers and aunts and uncles in abundance is very good news. Challenging and somewhat disorienting, but very good news.

Most churches of our size tend to think of themselves as being like one big extended family. Sometimes that is good and healthy and supportive, and sometimes it is actually a bit oppressive and dysfunctional and even dangerous, like the worst of families. Sometimes it means that there is a lot of hidden conflict and that only people "like us" are welcome. Often though, in both the good ones and the bad ones, the thing that is really holding us together is a long history of being together. We've known each other a long time and we've grown comfortable together.

But the kind of family Jesus is calling us to be, and is telling us we've been born into from the waters of baptism, is a lot more dynamic and open-ended than that. Jesus says his family is those who do the will of God, not just those who once signed up to the church and who've been here ever since, for better or for worse. He's saying that the thing that binds us together as family, as brothers and sisters, is that we seek together to discern and act on the will of God. Doing the will of God is what trumps everything in this family.

But hear the good news in this. We are called to be absolutely committed to doing the will of God together, to be giving ourselves heart and soul to the mission of God in the world, but we are not called to think of ourselves as a mission agency or a working group or a project team. We are called to know ourselves as a family of love, literally all born of the one father from the baptismal womb, sisters and brothers with all who share that commitment to doing the will of God. Not the kind of family that too many of our society's closed nuclear families have become, just miniature versions of selfish states or nations that care only for their own citizens and close their borders hard to outsiders who come seeking refuge and asylum. Jesus's new family, defined by doing the will of God together, is going to be way more open at the edges than that.

Bringing this right home to this church here and where we are at now, this call to be family helps make clear why we are having to talk about what it means to be church together beyond the Sunday worship gathering. Moving worship online, and now weighing up the proposal to keep it there makes this all the more obvious, but it was a question many of us were asking long before the first lockdown. The decision about worshipping online has almost made itself. The question of how we grow a culture alongside that that gets us spending time together, enjoying one another's company, loving and caring for another, learning together and having fun together, and most importantly encouraging and supporting one another in doing the will of God together, that's a question that won't answer itself. We're going to have to make it happen. We're going to have to step up and change, and become a people who really do the will God together as the central focus of our common life.

We can do this. We're already seeing little sparks starting to catch alight. Those of us who shared Tara's infectious joy as she chased the giant bubbles around at the Buddha day festival in Fed Square a few weeks ago got a taste of how easy and how much fun it can be. We can do this. We can become the family of Jesus together, with a place of safety and belonging for all of us, and always spare places at the table to welcome guests who may soon be our sisters and brothers too. We can do this.

As hopeful and exciting and sometimes scary as that vision is, where does it leave our biological families, our loved ones linked by blood and DNA? If you are desperately hoping for a way to reinstate them to their trumps-everything place in your life, there is really nothing I can offer you from the teachings or example of Jesus. But Jesus's disinterest in the tight-knit institution of family, and his slap down of his own mother and brothers in the story we heard tonight, does not mean for even one minute that Jesus wants us to ignore or abandon or turn our backs on our biological families. Jesus doesn't call us to ignore or abandon or turn our backs on anyone. The challenge is not a call to love our biological families less, it is a call to love everyone else more, to love everyone as much as we love family.

Jesus responded to many appeals from parents to heal their beloved children. He healed Peter's mother-in-law. He attended weddings with his own mother, and supplied the wine for the marriage celebration. And as he hung dying on the cross, he expressed his concern for his about to be bereaved mother, and spoke to one of his disciples about taking over responsibility for her care.

Even if our biological family are, like Jesus's sometimes was, resistant to the call to be a new family of people who do the will of God together, we are not called to love them or care for

them any less. Love is what trumps everything, and our love is not to be conditional, measured out only to those who qualify for whichever definition of family we favour.

Love trumps everything. Love God. Love your brothers and sisters who do God's will. Love your neighbours whether they do God's will or not. Love your biological family. Love your enemies. Love one and all. Love trumps everything. That's what it means to be the new family of Jesus.