

August 16, 2015

Luke 8:19-21; Mark 3:31-35; 6:1-6
Matthew 13:53-58; 10:34-30
(Mark 3:20-21; John 7:5)

HIS MOTHER AND HIS BROTHERS

When I was a boy, it was so long ago that children were supposed to be “seen but not heard.” Today that is considered to be a serious and unforgiveable put-down. Actually, our culture now has a long list of unforgiveable sins, and that really cramps God’s style. Anyway, I liked the rule. If children were supposed to be seen and not heard, that meant we got to do a lot of listening. I like to listen. Do we learn more from talking, or from listening? So why would I become a preacher? Well, we don’t always get to have our own way.

There was a phrase I used to hear with some frequency when I was young. I don’t hear it much anymore, but it would crop up in adult conversation quite often back then: “Blood is thicker than water.” I was no stranger to blood or water. Growing up on a little citrus farm with lots of animals, blood and water were just normal realities of life. We all got hurt from time to time. I bled; the animals bled – especially when I killed them for Sunday dinner. All part of life. And water was essential. Making sure all the animals had clean, fresh water was a very important part of my chores. But blood really *was* thicker than water. I knew that. It seemed so obvious, why would people bother to mention it?

Like so many of our phrases, it had implications deeper than what people seemed to be saying on the surface. So if you were listening – if you were supposed to be seen but not heard – you started trying to put things together. “Blood is thicker than water.” What was the context? What were people really talking about? It turned out they were talking about relational bonds. If you were related by blood – if you were relatives – the obligations and expectations of the relationship were usually much greater than if you had simply run into each other along the way. Friends were good, but relatives had a much greater “call” on your caring and your resources if need should arise. Remember, this was many years ago. Some things do not work the same way today that they did back then.

Anyway, this was a kind of summary statement people would use to punctuate a conversation about how relatives hang together tighter than just normal people. Only, sometimes my mother would confuse things by adding: “And Spirit is thicker than blood.” Most people did not seem to know that. Lots of them would not agree with her. But

she knew it to be true. She had lived through the breakup of some relationships with relatives because of the power of the Spirit. Marrying my father was only one instance. In any case, she was totally convinced that “Spirit is thicker than blood.” Today we are reminded that Jesus thought so too.

I suspect that quite a few people might be saying to themselves right about now: “This is not my experience. At least it is not true of most of the relationships I have had in the church.” There is little reason to quarrel about that. We all know that there are many relationships within every church we have known which are not based on any authentic spiritual connection. Jesus commands us to love one another, and clearly the implication is that we are to have bonds with each other based on the way He loves both of us. But the reality is that this level of love and friendship is not the normal experience in the Christian churches of our world. We do not all love each other in ways based on our relationship with Jesus. It is hard to imagine what life in the church would be like if this were true. The mere thought of it gives me strange feelings way down in the pit of my stomach. And what would belonging to such a church be worth to me? Maybe we don’t want to talk about that, but we nevertheless know it is true: such relationships would transform everything we think and know about the Christian Life, and about life in the Christian church.

But the problem, at least for me, is that most of know a few relationships – a few friendships – which have this quality to them. There are some people we do love “in Christ Jesus,” and some of them love us back “in Christ Jesus.” And that means it really is possible. *Oy vey!* Sometimes it’s easier when we do not yet know how good life can be; it’s okay to settle for acquaintances if we have never tasted true friendship. But what if we *have* tasted real Christian love? Sometimes at the foundation of our relationships is a mutual love for Jesus – and from Jesus – that brought us together and holds us together, regardless of outer circumstances and no matter what comes. Then we can truly say, “Blood is thicker than water, and Spirit is thicker than blood.”

Whether everybody knows it or hears it or not, this is exactly what Jesus is claiming in the part of the record we read about this morning: whoever really lives the Life, whoever truly obeys the Spirit’s call, whoever does the will of my Father in Heaven – that person is my true mother and brother and sister.

Wow! I mean, we ambled our way into it gently, but the fact is that Jesus invites us into an amazing and vibrant relationship with Him. He just invited us to be His mother or brother or sister. A true and dramatic relationship with the Messiah of God is ours – if we want it. It is hard to see and trust this at first, perhaps. But it is impossible to dispute it or miss it once we have seen it set so clearly before us. Do any of us want to be truly and deeply related to Jesus? The offer is open. It's our move. Of course, there is no way to know ahead of time where this will lead or what it will lead us into. But then, that is true of every authentic relationship we have ever known.

Maybe we should back up for a minute and catch our breath – make sure we are not getting carried away.

What is Jesus' relationship with His blood relatives? It is troubled, to say the least. Get past the malarkey of later add-ons and efforts to obscure the real story; Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all know and proclaim an earlier and more authentic tradition. Jesus really does have blood relatives. They are not half-brothers or half-sisters or a half-mother; those are lame attempts to “explain” away errors that never should have been believed in the first place. There is no evidence whatsoever that any of the primary Gospels are confused about Jesus and His family. *“Is he not the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary, his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? And are not all his sisters here with us?”* I am not the one doing fancy footwork. I am just reading it from Matthew's Gospel (13:55-56) – the main text before people started playing theological war games.

The story gets clear, and it is poignant. Jesus' ministry is developing rapidly. He is busy teaching and healing and preaching when His mother and His brothers come to “take charge” of Him. (Mark 3:21) They are worried about the growing opposition. They think Jesus has gone overboard. They think He is “out of his mind.” Not my words; Mark's words. In caring, no doubt, they come to save Him from Himself. But whatever their motives, it is a really poor idea to try to step between Jesus and His calling, His purpose, His obedience to God. Jesus disowns them. In so doing, He breaks the Fifth Commandment. *Shatters* might be more accurate. By the way, Jesus breaks half of the Ten Commandments in His determination to obey God. Or at least He breaks them according to the interpretations of all the most religious leaders of His time. “Honor your father and your mother” ... “She is no longer my mother.” That is exactly and precisely what Jesus is saying

in this moment. Of course, He will go on loving her, and we will see evidence even from the Cross. And Mary will grow up also and stop trying to run and control Jesus' life. But Jesus is not what we call "codependent" – except with God. So this is a very hard moment.

John's Gospel comments: "*Even his brothers did not believe in him.*" (John 7:5) And there are cryptic comments from Jesus Himself: "*A man's enemies will be those of his own household.*" (Matthew 10:36) "*A prophet never lacks honor, except in his home town and in his own family.*" (Matthew 13:58) And most difficult of all, "*Unless a person is willing to turn away from all the most important primary relationships in his or her life, that person cannot be my disciple.*" (Luke 14:26 – look it up.) Do we imagine Jesus is just making up hard sayings for the fun of it? Such a comment comes out of Jesus' own experience of what it cost Him to stay faithful and obedient to God.

This is Corona del Mar, where the houses are wonderful, the cars are beautiful, the waves roll in, and the sunsets are gorgeous. Do we imagine that behind the scenes there are no harsh choices being made, no difficult sacrifices being offered, and no tears being shed as people face the realities of their love for God and wrestle with what this means in our kind of world? Even though I sometimes try to preach, I still like to listen. Life in the Pastor's study is not the pastel-shaded fairy tale that most people are trying to pretend out in public.

We do not like it that Jesus was having problems with His own family members. If you live right and do things right, that is not supposed to happen. We all know this – just ask us. What good is Jesus if He cannot even guarantee good relationships within the families of faithful church members? And now it comes clear that if we pay attention to the real record – not the one so many people are making up, but if we actually read our Bibles – it turns out that Jesus was having serious difficulties with His own family members. None of them helped with His mission and purpose until *after* the Resurrection!

Perhaps we should stop long enough to remember what Jesus *does* guarantee: That God loves you. That you can have a wonderful relationship with God if you will trust God and open yourself to God's influence. Only, we keep trying to mix that with promises of prosperity, health, wealth, and ease.

Shall we dare to remember? Jesus' purpose on earth is to reconcile *all* people to God. We are not always very good at comprehending such a vast purpose, but if we stay clear, we don't get so sidetracked. The purpose is to reconcile us to God – not just others. The purpose is to reconcile others to God – not just us.

Our claim here – and we need to claim it more and more clearly, without anger or animosity – is that the more we study our Scriptures, the more we choose and walk the Christian Life ourselves, and the more deeply we pray, then the more we realize that the Gospel Message *has* been sidetracked along the way. Some of it is honest misunderstanding: One of the big myths of Christendom is that all the followers understood Jesus completely and perfectly from the beginning. That was never true, and it is not true now. All along the way we have taken the “new wine” of Jesus and poured it back into the old wineskins of our former convictions and assumptions. Very understandable, but also very sad. And it does ten times the damage for as long as we fail to realize it and admit it.

Doubtless some of it has been Satan working to keep us in constructs of fear and guilt so we will not claim the full light and truth that Jesus has brought to us. A small “for instance”: SALVATION is reconciliation with God. Most of Christendom has been sidetracked into a very different perspective. To them, salvation is a way to escape from being thrown into a fiery Hell at the end of life here on earth. Nothing could be a greater reversal of what Jesus reveals to us about God: from a loving *Abba*, to an angry and judgmental Tyrant who tortures through all eternity everyone who does not “believe it exactly like we tell them to.” Some human is always saying this in the name of God, making themselves the expert who knows – and knows better than Jesus. “I am the expert in my tiny little wing of the church, and I have the authority to say who is going to Hell and on what terms.” It doesn't matter if we understand any of it – just believe it. They know all the right formulas, and if you don't believe so, just ask them.

More humbly than some of you think, I try to straighten things around. I don't do it from my whim or opinion. I merely remind you of the scriptural record of what was really going on. And we need to keep matching that with their experiences – and with our own experiences. Many others could do this better than I do, but they are too busy saving the world or the ecology or the orphans or the poor, so they don't think paying attention to Jesus is very important anymore. I still believe that Jesus is our only hope. Having concerns for all our

problems does not turn us into saviors. We have urgent need to get back to the true Savior. Only, that means cutting behind the simple, cheap-shot assumptions our culture loves to substitute for who He is and what He is really like.

So I keep telling you: Baptism is the real Christmas. The Second Coming is Pentecost. He has come again, as He promised – “*I will be with you always, to the close of the age.*” And we are all invited to know and pay attention to His Holy Spirit every day of our lives.

Never ever will Jesus come as the avenging angel or the chief punisher/destroyer of some cosmic horror movie. That is *our* nightmare – not God’s agenda. Its seeds were planted in the apocalyptic expectations and hopes of a desperate people who portrayed a time when God would step in to right all the wrongs and save all the good guys from the bad guys. Only, that was a popular scenario long before Jesus arrived on the scene. Jesus was so unexpected and so different from any Messiah we ever imagined that we still cannot believe He did it right. So we keep trying to picture a time when He will come again and do it the way we think He should have done it in the first place. We turn many things into Hell, so we still want Jesus to do it our way.

Two thousand years of earth history now prove that Jesus coming again within the lifetime of the first believers was a total mistake and a complete misunderstanding of the purpose and intentions of God’s Messiah. Jesus did not come to bring us the Second Coming or the fires of Hell. He came to invite us into God’s Kingdom – and to invite us into His church, which was and is supposed to be the forerunner of His family and His Kingdom while we are here on earth.

If we love Jesus and want to be His followers, we build His church. Only, His church is *people*: a faith family of love and caring, of finding our calling, of supporting each other in all the experiences of trying on the New Life – where we know we are loved, the fear keeps losing its grip, and the guilt keeps getting healed and forgiven.

It keeps surprising us, doesn’t it? We did not realize at first how deeply mired we were in all the patterns of anger and inadequacy and loneliness. Do we ever get to choose, to decide, or to act out of what and who we really are? The miracle of Christianity does not begin with

us believing in Jesus. It begins with Jesus believing in us. Most people have the Cross all backward. It is not about appeasing God. God was not in trouble. Our mistakes, our blunders, even our evil do not threaten God. The Cross is about how important we are – what Jesus thinks we are worth. The Cross is about what lengths Jesus will go to to reach us.

But if we are not culturally hungover or too jaded to see what we are looking at, we hear Jesus in what could only have seemed like huge blasphemy in His day and time: *“‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ Jesus replied. And looking around at those who were sitting in the circle about him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”*

We get a hint of the intentionality, of the commitment and discipline, of the quality of relationship and mutual love and support that Jesus envisions for His faith family. It is light years – light *dimensions* – beyond what most people experience or imagine in their thoughts about “the church.” Yet watching the twelve as things unfold; listening to Paul’s letters to his Christian friends; thinking about Pentecost, baptism, and comments about the New Life in Christ Jesus and what it was like and about – that is what the early church was like for many people. It was for them the most exciting and promising LIFE they had ever conceived or imagined. A far cry in most places from what church members imagine or expect today.

And so, when Jesus’ mother and brothers show up to interrupt His ministry, there is a major disconnect. They think Jesus is getting in way over His head. They are worried about the mounting trouble they see Him heading into. They are worried about His safety, and they think He has lost touch with reality.

But whose reality? Theirs, or His? That part of our Faith is always true, is it not? From all normal perspective, Jesus and His followers are way off the charts when it comes to being personal and relational. If we are not friends, we cannot serve this Master. If we do not love each other, we cannot build His church. Our WAY of Life – in His name – requires that we trust each other more, care about each other more, and get more vulnerable and take greater risks with and for each other than makes any sense to the world and the realities all around us.

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Jesus thinks the New Life He represents and invites us into is worth any price, any cost, any sacrifice. It is a thing He will prove in spades, and many of His followers will prove it too. So He lives it out. Spirit is thicker than blood. Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters? Ah, there you are! Sitting right here this morning: the mothers and brothers and sisters of Jesus. Maybe we are still a little tentative about it from time to time. Maybe we still want to play it a little safe and wait for others to step forward more boldly first? But how long will Jesus let us get away with that? What good is our love if people do not know we love them? The *ecclesia* – the faith family of Jesus – is the most exciting adventure in all the world. Time to believe it – and to let those around you know it.