

Sunday 10th June, 2018
3rd Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

1 Samuel 8:4-20;11:14-15
Psalm 138
2 Corinthians 4-13-5:5
Mark 3:20-35

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

Today's Gospel reading might, on the surface at least, seem to be about family dynamics. Perhaps Mark is pointing out that Jesus, truly human, had to deal with the same sort of domestic family issues as we all do; that he is proving the old adage "you can't choose your family". After all, here we have Mary gathering the family together to go and confront their family member, Jesus; a man who it seems to them has lost his grip on reality.

And on one level this theme might have some importance for us - it is true that most of us have some form of family units that we have to deal with. And doubtless some of these are complicated and complex, and sometimes exasperating. Yet the ties that bind us are strong, and so we really try and make these things work. Yes, there is something in all this about how we live as a family; bound by blood and name.

What I want to argue this morning, however, is that Jesus is doing more than this. And that he is actually doing what he does best - starting with something that everybody knows something about - family - and then completely turning upside down people's ideas and preconceptions. This interaction is not a parable; at least not in its truest sense; but it does serve to leave us with that same feeling - what exactly does Jesus mean when he ignores the pleas of his family members and says these apparently callous words that seem to indicate that he is disowning them?

I want you to picture the scene that Mark lays out for us today - outside the house stand those who think that they are the insiders – the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and Jesus doesn't fit the bill.

Inside the house sit the outsiders – the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They're not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. And in the midst of them? Smack in the center of the sick, the insane, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox and the unwashed? There sits Jesus, saying, "This. This is my family."

With these words, Jesus throws into question the entire Jewish system of social construction. With it, he threatens to undermine the core of social stability. And if we're not taken aback by his words here, then we're not paying attention. Jesus isn't calling for mere surface change; he's dividing the house. He's burning things down. He's going for the deep, the institutional, and the systemic.

Jesus is expanding the definition of family to be a web of relationships that opens up places within it for a whole host of others. Jesus moves our understanding of family as simply a place of genetic origins to an understanding of family being a group of people that is marked instead by the choices we make as he says that "whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister."

I know intimately and well, as perhaps you do, the hunger to belong, to have someone safe and loving to belong to. Regardless of our circumstances, we all know what it's like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That's exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family.

So, according to Jesus, outside is in, and inside is out, and the people least likely to get it are the ones who consider themselves the most knowledgeable, the most “together,” and the most spiritually stable. What a challenge that provides to us as Church then; we who may feel as though we are right; or at least feel as though we might be “in”. It is a challenge to us as to how we relate to each other, given that Jesus declares us family. But even more of a challenge as to how open and welcoming we might be.

In thinking about this, maybe we should listen well to the words of the great Richard Rohr, who said that “When any church defines itself by exclusion of anybody, it is always wrong. It is avoiding its only vocation, which is to be the Christ.”

How do we think anew about this family, the Church, to which we belong, as we choose to do the will of God? And most importantly, how do we include all who come here. Let me share with you a story told by Bishop Gene Robinson, the former Bishop of New Hampshire, in the United States.

During WWII in France, four servicemen developed a strong bond of friendship with each other as they withstood the agonies and triumphs of war together . One was tragically killed and his three friends carried him some distance to the church in the nearby village where they called on the priest. They asked if they could bury their friend in the graveyard.

The priest asked if he was baptised. They replied that they didn’t think he was. To which the priest replied that he regretted that then he couldn’t be buried in the graveyard. The men were clearly distressed by this news and so the priest suggested that there was a nice field, with a great view next to the graveyard and that perhaps they could bury their companion there. So the men, because they had little choice chose to do that and placed a simple wooden cross on the spot to mark the grave.

After the war the 3 men returned to village, wanting to arrange for a proper headstone to place over the grave of their friend. They returned to the field and to their dismay found the grave had gone and there appeared to be no evidence of where it had been. They went looking for the priest, and asked if he remembered them. They told him that they couldn't find the grave and did he have any idea what may have happened to the body of their friend.

The priest said he did remember their visit very welland went on to tell them how after they departed that he was very troubled about his strict and strident ruling about whether their friend could be included in the graveyard. He said he prayed about itand said that he had moved the fence.

Yes, Jesus divides the house, and that process hurts. But he doesn't divide it to make us homeless. He divides it to rebuild it. To make it more spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful. Jesus moves the fence. The Spirit of God completes the good work that Jesus begins. God's will is that the church might be a family, and that it might be a house of healing for the whole world.

The Lord be with you...