

Blurred Biological Lines – Elise Cranston

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

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of OUR hearts be acceptable and pleasing in your sight O Lord, our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Perhaps some of you remember a couple years ago when Kent Dunnington preached a very memorable sermon containing a certain scandalous word: orgy. Kent told the story of Jerry from Seinfeld who, when confronted with a surprising sexual invitation, told his friend George that he was just not an “orgy guy.” With the example of Jerry's social imaginary of what it would mean to be an orgy guy, Kent taught St. Paul's that Christians are not called to be family guys, but rather called to be disciples. This challenging message was no doubt softened by the ridiculous number of times Kent squeezed in the word orgy. While Kent's sermon was humorous, his call to reassess our obsession with family values was startling. Kent's exhortation that the cost of discipleship is high, and demands everything, even our families, permeated my thinking as I prepared this sermon. However, I promise you all that I will not use the word orgy after this opening paragraph, a promise that I am sure will be a relief to some and a great disappointment to others.

Like too many other good messages, Kent's sermon has since become buried in the distraction of other new ideas and the busy-ness of life. But as we depart this week from John's gospel to spend six weeks with Mark I am drawn to Jesus' strange ideas about family. This morning our gospel text pushes us deep into the realm of Jesus' radical and strange ideas. In today's passage from Mark's gospel Jesus redefines and extends our understanding of family through the recreation of a family not established by the blood of our genetics, but by the waters of our baptism and our obedience to God's will.

Should we be surprised that God's vision of family is much larger than we imagined? We should expect such expansion, such broadening of our narrow focus, from God. When left to our own desires our definition of family would be much narrower. In our passage from 1 Samuel the Israelites request a man to rule over them rather than God. This request is a continuation of their endless rebellion against God—and the reason this time? Verse 19-20 reads that the Israelites are determined to have a king rule over them because they want to *be like other nations*. While we might scoff at this blatant giving in to peer pressure, we do this too! We believe that we know better than God, but really we just want to fit in. We want our families to be “normal”. We want to be just like the other kids on the block. But what if God actually has a much more beautiful, more expansive, more variegated and multicolored vision of family for us?

In order to understand this strange and new family it is important to consider the role family plays in shaping our worldview. For this I must borrow a term Kent used in his sermon, social imaginary. Social imaginary is a sociology term that refers to the way we see or imagine the whole world. Social imaginary will shape what we believe is possible and impossible, what is common sense and what is ridiculous.

For both our current context and Mark's audience, God's call to expand our definition of family is surprising, challenging, and relevant. Pheme Perkins, in the NIB, notes that given the large number of adult converts in Mark's audience many of them had most likely experienced crisis and divisions in their own family. Meanwhile our North American context reveals that family is the defining feature of our social imaginary. Family creates the lens through which we see the world. Family sets boundaries and instructs every detail of our lives. A good example of this is Tyler's confusion about who I am actually biologically related to. Early on when we started dating he was convinced I was related to everyone because I called Mathias and Ann "Grandpa Matt" and "Grandma Ann." (I bet Mathias and Ann would love it if I wasn't the only one practicing these familial terms.) The confusion continued when I studied abroad and gained 3 new families, and would call all of them "Mom," "Dad," "sister," or "brother." Tyler's confusion, although understandable, illustrates our limited view of family. When we take family to be so integral to our social imaginary, we go beyond merely caring for or loving our family members, and begin to move into the realm of family becoming an idol.

Family values all too easily supersede the gospel, our call to discipleship and to do the will of God. Reverend Will Willimon tells a story that illustrates this kind of familial compromise. As a young pastor Willimon was in a discussion at his church about the Ten Commandments. As he was telling the group that the Ten Commandments are straightforward, no-nonsense commands of God that we are always to obey, one member of the group spoke up asking, "How do you mean, 'always obey'?" Willimon replied, "Well, murder—we all agree that we should not kill, right?" In that group, in his church, Willimon says that people responded, "Yeah, you should not kill...except...Except! If my family was threatened then I would kill!" Willimon comments that this kind of replacing of God's commandment with a higher "family value" doesn't seem right.

Given our obsession with family, it is astonishing for us to hear Jesus devalue and disown his biological family. Despite our own obsession with family, Jesus' family ends up taking a minor role in his story. According to this Mark passage Jesus had a number of brothers and sisters, but what does the Bible tell us about them? Not much at all. This morning's passage is one of the few times that Jesus' family is even mentioned, and it is strange.

The strangeness begins when Mark implies that when Jesus went "home," it was not to the home where his family was residing. Verse 21 reads, *When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him.* Perkins suggests it is Peter's home in Capernaum, because earlier in Mark 2:1 Peter's home is referenced as the place Jesus goes home to after preaching in surrounding regions. The strangeness continues in verse 31 when Jesus' family is unable to reach Jesus, and so must go through the crowd to speak to him. This creates an image of his family literally being outsiders, separate from Jesus. Is it not strange that a crowd surrounds Jesus, yet his family is stuck on the outside?

Near the end of Mark's passage, when the crowd tells Jesus, *Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you,* Jesus replies in an alarming way, *Who are my mother and brothers?* Jesus continues, *Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.* My guts churn as I listen to him deny his own family! Why does Jesus devalue something we all hold so dear?

Jesus' indifference toward family values is not just in our gospel passage this morning but is a theme throughout the gospel narratives. Jesus seems to have no trouble tearing families apart and demanding fishermen leave their families behind with a short, *Follow me*. In Luke 9 one man responded to Jesus' call, *Lord, let me first go and bury my father*, and Jesus responded, *Let the dead bury their own dead!* Wait, what? That is pretty insensitive!

However, all this does not mean that God is against family or that family is evil. In fact, God is determined to have family, but a much bigger, more diverse, and beautiful family than we could ever imagine. For Christians, family means church with a capital C. For Christians, our family ties are not marked by the blood rushing through our veins, but by the water poured over our entire bodies in baptism. When anyone is brought or comes forward to the baptismal font, the church washes them with water, declaring that person has been reborn and is now adopted into a new God-formed family. Through the waters of our baptism we are invited to let go of our North American rugged individualism and become willing to be born again into a family as large as the grace and goodness of God.

2nd Corinthians also advocates that there is something longer lasting than the external markers of physical family. Verse 18 reads: *Because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.* We are to look to our unseen connections to the God's family of the church. Verse 16 tells us, *Even though our outer nature (our biological lines) is wasting away, our inner nature (an expansive family) is being renewed day by day.*

It is interesting how tightly we hold on to our biological families, considering how often our families of origin are the source of much personal pain. Can the traditional family withstand the moral and spiritual weight we have put upon it? I bet all of us here today have stories about deep wounds from our family; I know I do. This is not because our families are evil, but because they are not big enough!

Two parents cannot raise a Christian on their own; it takes a much larger family of those who do the will of God. Our human families, despite their love and care, are just too small, too narrow, and too homogenous. In God's infinite wisdom and goodness God grants us a new family whose boundaries go beyond every nation, race, color, and language. Our family becomes people whom we are related to only because of Jesus Christ.

Jesus' focus this morning is not only in redefining family but calling us to do and act in accordance to God's will. The only other reference to God's will is Mark 14:36, when Jesus prays at Gethsemane, *Father, everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will.* This connection is scary; our new family is not based on warm fuzzy feelings but radical obedience to our call as disciples to take up our cross. We belong to Christ's family as we practice God's will, as we respond with obedient lives, and as we find our true and eternal home in God—all things that we are to do together.

What does this new family mean for a culture whose lives are saturated with family values? It should flip our worlds upside down. What has previously seemed obvious may no longer make any sense. Perhaps it means we don't move out of the "bad" neighborhoods or schools for our

kids. Perhaps it means we welcome guests to stay in our homes, or even to our family holidays. This new ethic that Jesus is proposing is life-changing. Soon as we recognize others as a part of our own family, what seemed clear is blurred, and our lives will become messy.

I am not exactly sure what this new family looks like, but I would like to conclude with a story of being pulled into the Church family. As a sophomore I was not content with my major and felt fairly lost and unconnected to academics. One day as I ventured into the dining commons Ben Wayman approached me and asked, "When are you going to preach at St. Paul's already?!" I was caught off guard and frankly thought he must have mistaken me for someone else. However, I took a chance, went for it, and it now symbolizes a turning point. Since Ben's invitation, I have had many more experiences with members of this church that have made me feel like family. Through this family born of water and spirit I have been able to more faithfully align my life with the will of God. Perhaps this is the very reason Jesus extends our understanding of family, so that with a broader and deeper perspective we are better able to do the will of God together.