

Pastor's Message – 6/6/2021
Mark 3:20-27, 31-35 2 Corinthians 4:13-18

Once upon a time, the “traditional” American family was different than today. Once upon a time, if all you did was watch television commercials for minivans, you might think that the traditional All-American family consisted of Mom, Dad, dog, and the 2.5 kids.

I don't watch a lot of television; mostly Milwaukee Brewer telecasts, but it seems to me that the make-up of families is changing in commercials. It seems to me that there are a lot more multi-racial families than I remember in television commercials of the past.

Research bears that out. The traditional nuclear family is increasingly being replaced by non-traditional family units. With so many blended stepfamilies, children with same-gender parents, and single-parent families - - not to mention adoptive families -- the idealized family of two parents, two kids, and a dog is becoming something of an anachronism...

Those changing mores can make some folks uncomfortable, if they even notice. Changing moral values can raise people's hackles and lead to confrontation and conflict. Throughout the gospels, especially in Mark's gospel, Jesus' words and actions are causing conflict. He makes enemies early, as early as the 3rd chapter of Mark. No surprise, of course, Jesus Himself says, in Luke 12 and Matthew 10, that He has come to bring division. His words today do just that.

With a sweeping gesture to enfold all those inside the house in our Bible reading today into his new family—the disciples and the crowds pressing in on him—Jesus excludes His biological family standing outside the door. “Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Here are my mother and my brothers!” Jesus comes across as hostile, shockingly harsh—almost anti-family.

If Jesus' treatment of his family shakes our modern sensibilities, can you imagine its impact on his hearers—given the Jewish emphasis on family as the center of religious practice? For generations, Hebrews had understood salvation to be transmitted through birth into a Hebrew family. Marriage and procreation, i.e., the more children the better, especially boys, were seen as the highest of blessings. And now here comes Jesus proclaiming a new family defined as those who seek to do God's will—whatever their family or kinship background.

If our historical picture is correct, the people to whom Mark is writing had already left behind their families, clans, and local religious communities out of political and economic necessity. They were city dwellers cut off from the support of their families and home communities. In the multicultural city, pagans, Jews, Christian Jews, and gentile Christians rubbed shoulders on a daily basis. If the crowds who surrounded Jesus felt like outsiders to their home communities, Jesus is now inviting all those who live fragmented lives—far from the support of family and clan—into a family transformed, where they will be insiders at the core of a new community. To a people torn from their roots, this must have been a welcome message.

How does it sound to you? Is it as welcome a message to you as it may have been to the first readers of Mark's gospel? At the end of the passage, when the concerned family members - that's not us - arrive to see Jesus, Jesus takes the opportunity to redefine family. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asks. And then he points to those who do the will of God as his true family. It is a redefinition of family that helps us to understand the church.

According to Jesus, God's family does not consist of:

A. Only those related by blood.

B. All those created as humans. All people are human beings, but not all are children of God.

C. Only those of like race or religion.

God's family does consist of those who do the will of God.

You know, there is something strange about the church. We are not just another club or civic organization. The church's view of reality is increasingly out of phase from a lot of prevailing views. In the church, we do and say things that do not always make sense to people outside of this house. We have our own language, our own music, and our own unique way of doing things. Here we are, gathered on the weekend, sitting on hard pews instead of lawn chairs, maybe on comfortable chairs in our living rooms. People we know are outside, working on their tans or washing their cars, playing soccer or girls softball across the street from the Parsonage, while we gather here in the Church building or in our homes, inside, to lift our voices in prayer and song. As a lot of other people are planning a barbecue or sipping a Bloody Mary or drinking a beer, we come together on a morning like this to break bread and drink from the cup, sing church songs, listen to a preacher, pray together, give money without taking something of substance home with us. To some outsiders, it must look a little bit crazy. We look different than much of the rest of the world.

What would the church look like if it were built upon Jesus' model of family transformed—of community where caring and equal relationships are given priority? What if we were less of a business and more committed to generous giving? How might our program priorities shift? What if our meetings were structured to create a community of brothers and sisters, mothers and nurturing fathers? How might we do committee work differently? Would we even have committees? If we actually lived into Jesus' vision of family, how would the church of today be even more different than it already is?

These are some questions for us to ponder in our Bible readings for today:

1. Are we actually members of Jesus' family? Are we team players with Jesus? Do our efforts support or hinder his mission to build the Kingdom of God in our world? Are we team players in the world? Are we willing to work with others in order to benefit the whole? Or are we people who would rather "go solo"? Can we trust others to be present and work with them or do we place hope and confidence only in ourselves?

2. Do we believe in the power of God in our lives? Can we perceive God's action in the world or do we allow ourselves to remain in the dark? Do we have the faith to see the victory of God over the forces of evil?

3. Do we concentrate on the negative in life? Do we see the glass of water as half empty and think about all that we cannot do? Or can we, rather, look at the glass as half full and see all the things that we can do and have accomplished?

4. Do we make our best efforts to bring unity and harmony to the various situations in life? Can our actions be seen as restorative and unifying or divisive? Do we rally people together or is our attitude one that alienates others?

I've been dealing with this question since I became a Pastor almost 21 years ago and, I suspect, most other clergy do too. Most churches do. So often in the church, the discussion revolves around the question of how we can grow the size of a congregation. This is the wrong question. It is not about growing the size of the family, the congregation, but rather about how we can help people do the will of God. Our goal should not be to make sure that a congregation survives, but that the reign of God is spread throughout the world. Although we may have emotional links to a particular congregation, it is not our organizational survival that matters in the end, but, rather, whether we are able to reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes one hears the objection that the congregation can't reach others that aren't here or, in a post-pandemic world, participating and worshipping through the marvels of livestream technology, and that is true, but the reign of God does not depend on one particular congregation existing in one place at one time. It depends on those Christians who are part of the family being faithful in the best way they possibly can. For some of us it may mean making the hard decision that we could do better work by shutting our doors and taking ourselves and our resources to another congregation where we could be involved more in ministry and less in the maintenance of our organization.

Many of us have been involved in organizations that were dying. It may have been a Rotary, Lions, or Kiwanis club or any of a number of other groups. I attended the Memorial Day ceremony at Shaler Park in Waupun last Monday and there was a plea from the microphone for younger service men and women to get involved in the VFW or the American Legion. If you have been in a group like those, you know what it is like to have the focus shift from the work of the group to the survival of the group. People are sought out not because the organization can help that person or because that person can contribute to the mission of the group, but rather because they are a warm body who hopefully has some money, time, and energy to spare.

There are pastors who, when their congregation says that they need young families, are quick to assert that it is not true. I've said it too. There are many congregations which survive and even thrive with only older members. However, we are not about survival, for there are young families in our neighborhood and in our city, all around us, who need Jesus Christ and the church. We need to reach them not because they will help us but because we need to help them. It is not about enlarging the family so it can survive, but rather it is about helping others to know the joy of a relationship with God in Jesus Christ. It is our joy and privilege to give what we already have.

God has given expansive grace. "[As] God's grace," Paul says in his 2nd Letter to the Corinthians today, "reaches more and more people..." (v. 15). God's grace, by its very nature, is expansive; like a gas, it seeks to distribute itself over the widest possible area. We distort God's grace when we try to keep it to ourselves, but when we give free reign to God, there will be great thanksgiving, and God will receive more and more glory." (v. 15).

We know that our religion is supposed to be more than just a refuge. It should be a shaping influence on all that we do or say or think. After all, that is what Jesus Himself said when telling us that we should love God with all our heart, our soul, our mind, and our strength. That is a daunting proposition. But Paul offers us encouragement.

Any passage that begins with "but," like the section of Paul's Letter that we heard from today, requires a bit of introduction. It clearly has some larger context that needs to be explored. So, as we unpack these verses for today and try to put them into practice, we need to have a sense for what preceded them.

The preceding section of chapter 4 features the much-beloved reference to "treasure in clay jars" or "earthen vessels." That captures a grand paradox Paul has in mind. It is this strange and lovely business of something valuable being entrusted to something very ordinary.

The larger context of our assigned passage is a profound and lovely discussion of the work of the gospel. It is a spiritual work with eternal results, to be sure. Yet that work takes place in time and is done by human instruments. We are the earthen vessels that God has entrusted with His plan and purpose. God gives the job to us and provides all that we need to carry it out.

As “earthen vessels,” we are not always going to get it right. Following Jesus is not an easy task and not everybody is willing to take up the cross. Like any family, we are not always going to get along in perfect peace and agreement. Conflict is a reality in every community. The life of discipleship to Jesus often leads us into, and sometimes even, causes some measure of conflict, not just with “outsiders,” but within the Christian community itself, as well.

Conflict is inevitable for all of us, including disciples of Jesus. The question for us is how we navigate our way through it, even and especially when we may have caused it to some degree, have inherited it or may be continuing to cause it, and in the midst of navigating through it, still serve as faithful disciples.

Thankfully, Jesus gives us the way through. Jesus tells us who his disciples, and so his true family, are: “Those who do the will of God.”

Those who are doing the will of God are those who are following Jesus and joining him in his mission of announcing the kingdom of God in word and in deeds, such as healing the sick and casting out demons, delivering people from the sources of their suffering and captivities (Mark 3:7-19).

So today is a day to give witness to ways disciples of Jesus are doing or can still be doing these very things here and now. Disciples of Jesus, as we strive to grow in holiness, move onto perfection and live out our God-given mission in the world, need to know that we do so with both our limitations and the promise of help from God through whatever our ministries may be: proclaiming the kingdom, healing, and delivering. As we do so, we are the family of Christ.

Paul’s Letter kind of reminds me of the old game show, Let’s Make a Deal, with Monty Hall. He would offer some contestant a chance to earn easy money. He would give \$50, for example, to a woman who had a pen in her purse. Once that person was up and playing, now with cash in hand, Hall would offer to trade them that fresh cash for something else. This is where the gamble began to come in. Was it preferable to hold onto the small but known winnings, or to trade it in for whatever was behind “Door Number Two?”

The deal-making might go on through several layers with a given contestant. They might trade one thing in, only to get a somewhat better thing. Then Hall would ask if they would trade that better, known thing for yet another unknown, which, of course, might be better still. Up and up it might go, until the person ends up trading in a brand-new living room set and win a Caribbean vacation or a new car! Or, alternatively, they might trade in that living room set for a year’s supply of tuna fish.

The appeal for the contestants, of course, was all that they might win. The appeal for the audience was watching the contestants agonize through the tough choices. Shall I hold onto what I know is pretty good, or shall I trade it in for what might be really great?

By the design of the show, however, no one was ever asked to trade in what was truly great for something that, at best, would only be pretty good. Yet that is always the devil’s deal.

We can hang onto what we have right now, what’s right in front of us, or trade it in for God’s promise of greater things to come. Paul acknowledges that we trade in the troubles of today for the glory yet to come. “Our present troubles are small and won’t last very long. Yet they produce for us a glory that vastly outweighs them and will last forever! So, we don’t look at the troubles we can see now; rather, we fix our gaze on things that cannot be seen. For the things we see now will soon be gone, but the things we cannot see will last forever.” (2 Cor. 4:17-18)

Paul’s theology is brilliant. “Won’t last very long” is balanced by “forever.” “Small is set against “outweighs.” “Troubles” are compared with “glory.” In Old Testament Hebrew, the word for “glory” shared the same root consonants as the word for “heaviness” or “weighty.” Perhaps this linguistic backdrop factored into

his theology: namely, that the troubles of the present age are not only temporal, but also lightweight. The glory of God, by contrast, is never-ending and it is substantial: solid, heavy, weighty.

The things that will last forever, things of real substance and importance, come about by following Jesus, striving to live in unity with each other, and living as brothers and sisters in Christ.