

Family

Our families can be a mixed blessing sometimes, can't they? We shouldn't be embarrassed to admit that; almost every family in the Bible has trouble getting along at some point. From the marital squabbles of Adam and Eve, to their fratricidal son, Cain; from Noah's trouble with his son, Ham, to the rivalries between Jacob and his brother, Esau, and that of Jacob's wives, Leah and Rachel; all the way to the contest for preeminence between the Sons of Zebedee and the disbelief of Jesus' own nearest and dearest, the Bible shows that a certain amount of friction in the family unit is almost guaranteed. Against these, of course, we also have stories of the blessing of family: Esau's forgiveness of Jacob, Miriam taking her little brother to the bulrushes and her faithful support for Moses as an adult, Ruth's unswerving loyalty to Naomi, Andrew introducing Simon to Jesus. Nobody can "push our buttons" like family but nobody can love us as well, either.

My ruminations on these Biblical stories this week caused me to think about my own family of origin as well. My parents were always very open with me about my two lost siblings. My sister Desirée, who died at just short of four months, would be nearly 63 now. My brother David, who lived just hours, 61. I felt their absence in my life keenly. What would it be like, I often wondered, to have a big sister and a big brother? I think that's part of the reason that I've always pursued strong friendships and tried to stay in touch with friends even while moving all over the U.S. and England until we came here. For various reasons, I'm not in touch with friends I made before I was ten, but friends I made from 1970 onward, especially those connected with churches we attended, hear from me regularly. They are my surrogate siblings.

My sister Suzanne came along when I was nearly eight. I adored her as a baby and, I think, she me. Things began to change when she became mobile enough to raid "my stuff." Eventually, we began to fight like, well, like brother and sister. But Connie and I were the first to the hospital when her eldest was born and I spent long hours at the hospital with Suzy again when she attempted suicide some years later. Suzy lived with Connie and me on two different occasions – neither worked out well – but we made it a point last autumn to rendezvous with her in England and it was honestly one of the highlights of the trip for me to see her happier and more at peace than I'd seen her in years. For all of the heartache she's caused me over the years, I really do love my little sister and I'm glad she's still in my life.

I get the impression that Jesus felt the same about his family, even though they are a negative example in today's story. We know from the stories of his birth and childhood that he had a strong positive relationship with his mother and "earthly father," Joseph. You've often heard me highlight that in sermons during Advent and the Christmas season. But, with the exception of this story and one other, we know almost nothing from the Gospels about his relationship with his siblings. The scarcity of information about them is complicated by the fact that the majority of the world's Christians deny their existence, at least as Jesus' blood kin. If one subscribes to the doctrine of Mary's perpetual virginity, as do the Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox, Lutherans, and "high church" Anglicans, then references to Jesus' brothers and sisters are an embarrassment, argued away as children of Joseph's earlier marriage or cousins. But if one takes those references at face value, then we know from the story of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth that he had four brothers named James, Joseph (Joses), Judas (Jude), and Simon, plus an unknown number of sisters; in other words, a normal first century Jewish family.

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Today's story is told in nearly identical form and context in the Gospels according to Matthew and Luke. After a day of wrangling with the Pharisees, stories which I told in the past few weeks, Jesus is told that his mother and brothers wish to see him. Jesus' response must have surprised them: "'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.'" We've probably heard this story so many times that it no longer seems strange to us. Let me suggest a couple of things that we may not think about when we hear it.

First of all, in Jesus' society, family was even more important in the individual's life than it is today. In their book, Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels, Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh write: "In antiquity, the extended family meant everything. It was not only the source of one's status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network. Loss of connection to the family meant the loss of these vital networks as well as loss of connection to the land. (Remember, this was an agrarian society, built around the family farm.) But a surrogate family, what anthropologists call a fictive kin group, could serve the same functions as the family of origin, and thus the Christian community acting as a surrogate family is... the locus of the good news. It transcends the normal categories of birth, class, race, gender, education, wealth, and power." In just three sentences, Jesus has overturned the normal order of his society, replacing family with faith group.

Second, this revolutionary statement would have been particularly meaningful to Jesus' disciples. When we consider the importance of the family to daily life, we realize anew what a profound sacrifice Jesus asked of his disciples when he called them to leave their family farms and fishing businesses and to follow him in his itinerant ministry. In fact, earlier in the Gospel According to Matthew, Jesus has made an even more radical demand of his disciples: "Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, yes, and even life itself, cannot be my disciple." Jesus, of course, is not calling for hatred but rather using hyperbole to point out how much more intensely faithful his disciples must be to the new Way than they are to the old. Now, before those same disciples, Jesus declares that his fidelity is likewise for them because they have given their lives to following his vision of God. His "heavenly Father" and his disciples are now Jesus' "real" family.

Matthew and Luke, by the way, have probably learned this story from Mark, if scholars are correct in their assessment of the priority of Mark's Gospel. Interestingly, Matthew and Luke have actually softened the story told by Mark. Mark uses the story of Jesus' family to bracket the disputes with the Pharisees. Before Jesus' clashes with the religious leaders, we read in Mark 3 that Jesus is so swamped with those coming to be healed and to hear his teaching that he cannot even sit down and eat. "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.'" Jesus' mother and brothers are then left waiting while Jesus argues with the Pharisees and is told by them that he is in league with Beelzebul. It's quite a one-two punch in Mark's telling. Jesus' family think he's gone mad; the religious leaders accuse him of being an ally of demons. The two groups of people who should have been first to recognize him in his mission have rejected him. It gives even more poignance to his declaration that his disciples, those who trust him and God, are his real family.

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This is not the last time that Jesus will confirm the new family ties between himself and his disciples. There is, of course, the famous incident in the Gospel According to John, when, as he is dying on the cross, Jesus puts the care of his mother in the hands of John. That his mother has come to witness her son's death, while his brothers stay away, is a sorrowful continuation of the story in the Synoptics that we have just considered. John, the one disciple who has come close enough to his dying leader to be seen, is truly Jesus' brother at the moment of his death, the only one he can trust to look after Mary. And, in the Gospels of Matthew and of John, the Resurrected Jesus returns to this theme again in his words to the women in Matthew and to Mary Magdalene in John. In Matthew 28, he says, "Do not be afraid; go and tell my brothers to go to Galilee, and there they will see me." And in John 20, "Do not cling to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father; but go to my brothers and say to them, 'I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.'" In the latter, Jesus extends the idea of "fictive kin" even further; if the disciples are his brothers and sisters, then his Father, God, is also their Father.

There is plenty of evidence that the Early Church took these words of Jesus to heart. In Acts 9, we read the story of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus, later known by the Greek version of his name, Paul. As he is lying in Damascus, blinded by God, a believer sent by God named Ananias comes to heal him. Ananias greets him as "Brother Saul." Paul will go on to use this understanding in his letters to churches, including in I Corinthians, when he admonishes church members about "brother going to law with brother," and in II Thessalonians, when he calls on the Christians there to admonish those who have fallen away "as brothers." Historically, we have evidence that this quirk of the Christians was well-known outside the church as a second century work by Marcus Felix includes the accusation of a pagan named Caecilius that the Christians call each other brother and sister to cover up bizarre practices. And, back to the New Testament, The Epistle of James opens with the leader of the Church in Jerusalem addressing his fellow Christians as "brothers and sisters."

That particular piece of faithfulness to Jesus' teaching provides one of the most touching examples of the complicated nature of the relationship between family members. The supposed author of the Epistle of James is, after all, the brother of Jesus, presumably one of those who came to take his crazy older brother home from the danger of the crowd. In I Corinthians, Paul writes that the Resurrected Jesus appeared to James, which was apparently enough to convince Jesus' little brother that Jesus knew what he was talking about after all. James rapidly became one of the leaders of the Church in Jerusalem and was eventually killed for it, in 62 CE. The historian of the Early Church, Eusebius, tells us that he was succeeded as "Bishop of Jerusalem" by his cousin, Symeon, who was also crucified by the Roman authorities. We have another general epistle in the New Testament from another younger brother of Jesus, Judas (or Jude). There is a story, related by the Roman historian Hegesippus, that two of Jude's grandsons were called before Domitian, Emperor of Rome from 81-96 CE. Domitian had taken it into his head to exterminate any remnant of the House of David, which would have included Jesus' family. When Jude's grandsons, James and Zokar, who lived outside Rome, were identified as descendants of David, the emperor had them arrested. When he questioned them, he learned that they were poor farmers, who possessed only the land of their small farm. When he saw that they had the hardened hands of common laborers and that they made no claim to an earthly kingdom, Domitian "despising them as of no account, ...let them go..." Jude's great-grandson, also named

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Judah, was Bishop of Jerusalem until the city was destroyed by the Romans and the Jews expelled from the area. From that point on, the earthly family of Jesus of Nazareth vanishes from historical record.

And perhaps that's just as well. Given the relatively recent frenzy over Dan Brown's The DaVinci Code, who knows what sort of mischief might have arisen over the centuries with a focus of the other children of Mary and Joseph. But as Jesus himself pointed out, bloodlines aren't really what matters. What mattered to Jesus and to Paul and, I dare say, to James and Jude and to Jude's descendants, is how the men and women around them responded to the Good News of God's love delivered and embodied by Jesus. That is a distinction that we continue to note today. When I say, as I do often from this pulpit, that you are my sisters and my brothers, it is not simply that I have chosen you as surrogate family, like the lonely little boy I was looking for the big brother and big sister he never had. The bond that is between us is far deeper than that. It is, of course, one of affection, but more importantly it is a recognition that we have the same Loving Creator, that we strive to serve our Mother/Father God through the same pursuit of justice, mercy, and humility, and that we work to follow our Brother, Jesus, and his Way as faithfully as we can. My own mother and brother and one sister are long departed. My other sister is thousands of miles from here. But in God's Church, I find, as Jesus promised, mother and brothers and sisters a hundredfold.

And so, my sisters and my brothers, as we prepare to share in the remembrance of the Lord's Supper, let us remember not only Jesus and his love for us, but that the love of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit has turned us into a family, woven together in the love that continues to flow in us and through us in Jesus' name. Thanks be to God! Amen.