

Proper 5 B

Mark 3: 20-35

Mothers, Sisters and Brothers

Who are my mother and brothers? As some of you may know, through the last several months, my parents, siblings and I have been learning what it means to be family in the midst of illness, to offer ourselves as best we can to each other when infirmity, the demands of careers and children all seem to conspire to draw us in different directions. We do it out of love, we say: taking very independently-minded people to hospitals and rehabilitation centers and doctor's appointments, but we do it also out of memory, memory of the kind of family my parents tried to nourish through many moves around the country, three brothers and sisters with very different interests and goals for our lives. Yet our parents tried to say yes to each of us, not just what we did but who we were, and that sense of family is what I have carried with me, especially as we have grown older and my parents need their own care.

It is something like what we try to be, right here and right now, mothers and brothers and sisters. We recognize how different we are and yet we understand that we are family, helping to grow the kingdom as best we can. That is why, when Jesus answers the words of the crowd, that his mother and brothers and sisters are here, it can perplex us. We all want to be insiders, to be part of the elite, but that is exactly what Jesus rejects in the presence of the scribes who know all the rules, who have put their own stamp on what it means to be holy. Just after he has appointed the twelve disciples, he has given them, and anyone else who will listen, new rules about what it means to be family, to be holy, in the midst of a world which will call them crazy or possessed. And that is what we try to do, to be family in a time and place that says we cannot make a difference; we try to become who we were meant to be when we are told that we don't have the right credentials and, in spite of the resistance, we do everything in our power to bear witness to the changing of the world.

Who are my brothers and sisters? Several years ago, at the end of a week spent in Central America building houses at an Episcopal Relief and Development site, several of us who had been working there shared lunch together and then had a Eucharist, local workers and foreigners together at long tables. We had spent many hours working with shovels under an impossibly hot sun, digging ditches for houses and a church, making concrete blocks and handing each other dozens of water bottles. As we got up to leave, our guests thanked us for our time together, which we returned in our halting Spanish. Then they asked us for our boots. We looked down at them, torn and smeared with sweat and concrete, and I'm sure more than one of us wondered why they would want to keep them. But I believe that those boots, ruined as they were, were sacramental for both of us, a reminder of the bonds we shared in spite of the few words we had in common, a family grown out of our commitment to our shared dignity and the work of the kingdom.

It is out of the depths of ourselves that we make this recognition of how intimately bound we are, how dependent we are on each other in a community founded in love. Often we are compelled by the frenetic nature of our lives to seek quick solutions to situations that require calm deliberation and patience. We have to cultivate the ability to wait upon God, to see the slow resistance

to change begin to dissolve before we can view each other differently. This willingness to wait has been growing in my own family and it has given us a chance to see each other differently, not only in the roles we assume but in the mutual interdependence that has slowly become a part of all our lives.

All this talk about seeing our mothers and sisters and brothers differently gives some light to the restraint that the family of Jesus tries to put on him, after the crowds have decided that “he is out of his mind.” Desmond Tutu, who has been called Beelzebub and worse during his own lifetime, says that in Africa when you ask someone, “How are you?”, the reply you get is in the plural even when you are speaking to one person. A man would say, “we are well”, or “we are not well”. He himself may be well, but his grandmother is not well and so he is not well either. Our humanity... is caught-up with one another's”. It is, as Paul says, looking not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen, as what can be seen is temporary but what cannot be seen is eternal. When Jesus looks around him and sees his mother and sisters and brothers, he is asking us to stretch our imaginations too. When we exchange the peace with one another, work in a community feeding program, we are doing so for our brothers and sisters, because there is no “I” in in the kingdom of God.

Nothing can be more radical than to see how we are bound this way. We live in a world that tells us that we can go it alone, responsible to no one but ourselves, but if we are looking with our hearts, we can see the people who have come before us worshiping with us in this very room, people half a globe away, who are yearning for the will of God exactly as we are. If you ask me, the sin against the Holy Spirit is to look at ourselves and say yes to the self-made people we want to be instead of the deeply interwoven people that we all are in the mind of God. To begin to do the will of God is to know that we are tied together deeply in ways that we can only partly understand and in ways only God can know.

So when we ask who are my mother and my brothers, we are asking something much bigger than we can answer on our own. It means saying yes to those with whom we disagree, the person we would rather avoid, the aunt or sister whose phone calls we would rather not return. It means looking for the kingdom of God in the places we do not want to go. I still remember a woman who tried to exchange the peace with someone with whom she was in conflict and was told, “I'm just not feeling very peaceful today,” and her remark to me was that it was not her peace to share: it was God's. We find our mothers and brothers and sisters, in Tutu's terms, when we recognize that we “are diminished when others are humiliated, diminished when others are oppressed, diminished when others are treated as if they were less than who they were”. The alternative is to say yes, yes to a world in which we are all searching for the will of God, because it is there that we will begin to understand what family really is.