

“A Chosen Family”
Matthew 12:46-50 and Mark 3:20-21
Lent IV: Justice and Repair
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Jim Segaar, Seattle First Baptist Church

Family. How do you respond when you hear that word? Do you smile? Or groan?

And Family Values, which usually translates to the speaker’s own values: “MY values!” With so much lack of compassion and downright cruelty associated with those words, Family Values has become poison for many of us.

But family is important. And not just biological family. The purpose of family goes beyond reproduction.

Dr. Barbara A. Holmes is a theologian, educator, and author, and one of my teachers at the Center for Action and Contemplation. In her book *Crisis Contemplation*, Dr. Holmes puts it this way:

“We are not creatures of our own making. We are shaped by our genetic coding, our environment (families and communities), and the breath of God. For good measure we are accompanied by an indwelling Holy Spirit who leads and guides us into all truth.” (pp. 28-29)

Now I admit that family may not be of equal importance to everyone. I’ve known a number of people who seem content to live alone and go through life mostly on their own. But that has never worked for me. I need to be part of a family, or at least have family-like connections with other people.

Today’s text, which we will get to in a minute, is about Jesus’ relationship with family - his biological family as well as a broader definition of the word. We know very little about Jesus’ birth family. Two of the gospels have splashy birth stories and introduce us to Mary and Joseph. In Luke 2 we read about 12-year-old Jesus staying behind in Jerusalem on a family trip, scaring his parents half to death. And in Mark 6 we hear from the neighbors that Jesus had four brothers named James, Josés, Judas and Simon. The same passage calls out some nameless sisters. I don’t want to leave the sisters nameless or numberless, so I decided there were three of them and their names were Patty, Maxine and Laverne.

And that’s all we know about Jesus’ birth family. Granted a lot more kerfuffle was added a few hundred years after his death, such as deciding that Mary stayed a virgin and any siblings were actually cousins or from an earlier marriage of Joseph. How many of you remember Father Guido Sarducci, the noted Vatican scholar on Saturday Night Live? He wore clerical clothing, a floppy hat, and lavender-tinted glasses. He always sported a lit cigarette and spoke in a Chef-

Boyardee-like Italian accent. Father Sarducci identified another sibling in what he called the Christ family, “Billy Christ,” but his sources are questionable.

In any case, Jesus didn’t live in some “Leave It to Beaver” 1950s imaginary TV household. He grew up in a big, poor family, and almost certainly that included it’s share of problems and drama. I can just imagine Joseph chastising a teenage Jesus for eating all the falafel, and the crumb-covered teenager screaming back, “You’re not my REAL father!” And the brothers, probably resentful, sharing some stolen wedding wine behind the woodshed. On seeing Jesus headed their way, they hide the jug and say something like: “Oh great. Here comes Jesus. God’s gift to humanity!” I think Jesus got along better with Patty, Maxine, and Laverne. According the pictures of Jesus that I grew up with, they obviously helped him with his hair and makeup. And then there’s mother Mary. It’s hard to imagine her doing much to keep a young Jesus in line. She was too busy pondering everything in her heart. Ponder, ponder, ponder!

Well that’s enough of my fantasies. Let’s turn to the story in today’s scripture.

Matthew 12.46-50, (from the New Revised Standard Version):

46 While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. **47** Someone told him, “Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” **48** He replied to him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” **49** Pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers. **50** For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

So what do you think of Jesus’ response to his family? Does it seem a little harsh, maybe rude?

Well there is more to the story. The gospel of Mark records the same incident, but the author adds some crucial information just before this incident. In Mark 3:20-21 we read:

20 Then he (Jesus) went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. **21** When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

The New International Version puts it more plainly:

21 When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him, for they said, “He is out of his mind.”

Maybe Jesus had reasons to be a bit peevish with this mother and brothers. Have you ever had some family members decide that you were out of your mind?

I have. When I came out as gay to my siblings one offered to pay for counseling to make me straight. Another one told me to just come home and everything would be all right. The message was simple: You’re broken. We can fix you. It didn’t bring us closer. It divided us. Some of us barely spoke for a decade.

So how does Jesus respond to his family? He refuses to let them define who he is and how he should act. And he defines a new family of the people around him. People who share his values and goals. A Chosen Family.

What is a family anyway? What is a chosen family? I think Dr. Holmes' description of a village comes close. She writes:

“Villages are organizational spaces that hold our collective beginnings. They are spaces that we can return to (if only through memory) when we are in need of welcoming and familiar places. What is a village, anyway, but a local group of folks who share experiences, values, and mutual support in common?” (*Crisis Contemplation*, p.83)

Family, whether biological or chosen, is a group of folks who share experiences, values, and mutual support in common. That's what Jesus and his disciples did for each other. Apparently Jesus' biological family did not share his values and provide mutual support. Many of us don't relate to our biological families that way. And like Jesus, many of us create our own Chosen Families. Possibly more than one.

I first became part of a chosen family in the early 1980s, during what was called the AIDS Crisis. HIV/AIDS was first noticed in the US in 1981. Early names for the disease included “gay pneumonia” and “gay cancer.” How did our nation respond? Was it like COVID, with vaccines and treatments fast tracked in weeks? No. The first treatment for AIDS, called AZT, was approved for use in the United States in 1987. Six years later.

In the meantime gay men, lesbians, and a few straight allies formed a community of support. We cared for the sick as well as we could, and memorialized the dead. So many dead. I volunteered as a chaplain at one of the first AIDS care centers in the nation near San Francisco. I talked with and sat with the living and led memorial services for the dead. And what was almost always missing? Family. Biological family. Mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers. Countless people died without support from their families because they were gay, banished as broken, as abominations. For me and many others, those were the days when Chosen Families became more important than ever.

And it's not just LGBTQIA+ people who need chosen families. So many people in our culture have chosen families, or crave one. Perhaps we move away from relatives for work or education, and we come together with others around shared interests. A sense of family can grow in groups like sports teams, co-workers, churches, choirs. Jim Ginn and I have several people in SFBC that we consider family, friends who are like sisters and brothers to us.

Why?

Because we need each other. Crave each other. Regardless of what pop culture says, life is a team sport. And biological families don't always meet our needs. But maintaining a family - chosen or otherwise - is not easy. Consider Jesus once more. His biological family, with the exception of mother Mary, disappears from his story as told in the gospels. And his chosen family, the disciples and other followers, constantly misunderstood, misinterpreted, and tried to manipulate him. They abandoned him, denied him. One of the chosen betrayed him. And yet, somehow they stayed together, even after Jesus' death.

So how did Jesus and the disciples do it? How do we manage to stay together as families and chosen families despite the inevitable pitfalls, disappointments, and hurts? How do we repair a broken family, a broken relationship of any kind? I think the first ingredient to repair is forgiveness. Each of us needs to forgive, and each of us needs to be forgiven, or the cycle of pain and brokenness will continue.

I think of my own biological family. Mom and Dad have passed on, so it's just my siblings and me. We all went through some tough decades relating to each other, but Mom and Dad kept bringing us together. And these days, even without our parents, we see each other on occasion. On purpose. It hasn't been easy. My toes still get stepped on, and I'm sure I step on my share of sibling toes as well. But we find a way to stay in contact, to love each other, to forgive each other, even if we never say those words.

In her best-selling book, "This Here Flesh," author Cole Arthur Riley tells many stories about her family. She especially writes about her Grandma and Father. Her grandmother survived years of sexual abuse as a child in a home "with people who were not her parents" until she finally ran away after giving birth when she was 15. Arthur Riley's father is depicted as a complex man. He was very loving to her, doing her hair and putting cocoa butter on her skin when she was young. And he sold and took drugs. She discovered him in the bathroom after an overdose and had to call the medics to save his life. Following that experience he entered recovery.

She writes: "This I believe. That I come from pain as much as beauty. And I don't have to make the pain beautiful in order to get free." (p.148)

Later in the book she tells of a conversation in later years with her father. She asked him if he ever felt free, and he struggled to answer. A weight built up on him. Worries about tomorrow. Regrets about his worst moments and bad decisions. She felt that weight come between them. She writes:

"We laugh, but we know there is a weight between us now. We both understand what he is naming is a tragedy. We hang up the phone, and I still feel it. Lacking the courage to call back, I send him a text - and perhaps it's better written, an artifact of our repair. I write, *I'm proud of you. And I forgive you. And I'm certainly not ashamed of you.* I don't know if my father felt any

freer reading those words. Maybe he'll read them over and over, letting his liberation build in him like a muscle. I hope." (p189)

I'm proud of you. And I forgive you. And I'm certainly not ashamed of you.

Have you ever said words like that to anyone? Do you need to?

Has anyone ever said words like that to you? Do you need them to?

Maintaining a family, whether biological or chosen, is not easy. Sometimes it feels like the most natural thing in all the world. At other times it feels like bearing the weight of the entire world. But in my opinion it is worth the effort. Because we need each other. We crave connection. We want someone to be there for us no matter what happens, and we need to be there for them.

There's a song, one of the anthems of my generation, that says this all better than I can. It was written by Carole King, and the lyrics begin like this:

*When you're down and troubled
And you need some lovin' care
And nothin', nothin' is goin' right
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest night*

(You've Got a Friend by Carole King)

If you don't already know the chorus, the lyrics are printed in the bulletin. The choir is going to sing *You've Got a Friend* for us now, and we all are invited to join on the chorus.

Benediction

Life is hard. Have you noticed? Another one of my teachers in life is James Finley. I offer a paraphrase of his words as a benediction.

"So, let us be absolutely grounded in the absolute love of God, a love that protects us from nothing, even as it sustains us in all things. It grounds us to face all things with courage and tenderness."

(adapted from James Finley, *Intimacy: The Divine Ambush*, disc 6, Center for Action and Contemplation)

And I would add, most often that love comes to us through the hands and mouths of our family and friends. Go now, and be that sustaining love for each other.