

Sermon: Love Will Keep Us Together

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Scripture: Mark 3:20-35

This week, I've been thinking a lot about the word: "family." What *is* a family? Who is our family? What are the characteristics of family? How do we quantify that essential element of our lives? When we think of family, many of us imagine a "traditional" family structure. We think of our children or grandchildren, parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles, nieces, and nephews, etc. We think of those we are related to by blood or, in some cases, by adoption. Family is a vital part of our lives, God has placed us in community, not isolation. Unfortunately, not everyone is lucky enough to have this kind of family and, for some, even if they do, their relationships are strained for one reason or other. For people on the margins of society, there is a phenomenon called, "chosen or found family" in which people who aren't related in traditional ways find and commit in some way to being there for each other. These chosen families are made up of friends who make an intentional choice to forge familial bonds with one another. Those bonds can sometimes be even stronger than the ones we are born into. In the LGBTQ+ community, this has been very common as individuals are ostracized from their families when they finally come out. It's the reason that so many of us wait until we're grown to do so. When you're an outcast from your family and most of society, you've gotta find your people somewhere.

There have been many movies and TV shows based around the idea of found families. One that comes to mind is the rag tag band of misfits who joins together to save the daytime and again in *Guardians of the Galaxy*, a superhero movie from the Marvel Cinematic Universe. That film takes outcasts to a whole other level as the characters forge familial bonds where there should be none. All of these aliens from diverse backgrounds and species across the cosmos come together, first out of convenience, but stay together because they build relationships that are as close to family as you can get. This and so many other examples prove that family isn't always defined as the group of people we are born into. Friends, as they say, are the family you choose.

In our scriptures this week, we pick up with Jesus surrounded by people and on the outs with both his family and the religious authorities. It seems Jesus is acting in a way that makes them think he's lost his mind, and not for the first time. Jesus is facing criticism because what he's doing and saying runs contrary to the neat and tidy worldview of those in power. So controversial are his ideas that he's accused of being demon-possessed, consorting with evil. After a back and forth with the scribes, Jesus is told that his family are still outside calling for him and he counters their call to him by turning the idea of "family" on its head.

They say, "Your mother and your brothers and sister are outside asking for you." Jesus says, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" then turns to the crowd of nobodies sitting before him and says, "These are my mother and brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." A version of exchange takes place in all four gospels and isn't the only time that Jesus has had some dismissive comments as relates to his family. As a twelve-year-old child in the temple, his family leaves without him only to go back and find him after three days seated among and teaching the teachers! When they ask what he's doing and why he made them search for him, he dismisses their worries, saying they didn't need to search for him because they should have known he needed to be in his Father's house. And the text tells us, they didn't understand.

They didn't understand. And they weren't the only ones. Jesus is out there doing things that are offensive to religious authorities. He's out there breaking Sabbath, healing the untouchables, eating with sinners and tax collectors, and the religious authorities are outraged not because they're bad guys, but because he's doing things they have believed to be against their religious practice. Jesus operates out of love for people, for the outcast, for those forgotten about; the religious authorities operate out of faithful obligation to their belief. They cannot see the work of the Spirit right in their midst and so they accuse Jesus of being possessed—and this is when Jesus gets angry and points out to them the one thing that will not be forgiven. He says people will be forgiven

for everything, except denying the work of the Holy Spirit. In this context, he's specifically speaking of their repudiation of his works of healing and freedom from captivity, their refusal to believe his miracles are the work of God. They reject the work of love he is doing in restoring people to wholeness and in doing so, reject the work of the Holy Spirit. It's worth noting that this statement about the one unforgivable sin really cuts down those long lists of "no-nos" throughout scripture, to say nothing of the lists human beings have created to judge one another. But, I digress.

For too long, divisions have existed between the exclusive "in" groups and the "others." Between religious authorities and the unwashed masses. Between the clean and the unclean. Between the good and the bad. These divisions only serve to keep us from seeing the Divine Spark that is in each and every being created by God. Jesus says quite clearly in this passage that division among people in a kingdom, in a house, whatever, will cause it to fall. Jesus came here to return the people to wholeness, individually *and* communally. This is Jesus saying, in part, at least, that we don't *have* to be divided, we can choose differently. All the people on the outside are his family because they choose to follow him, and in doing so, follow the will of God. His family and the religious authorities can be that, too, but right now, they aren't.

In this passage, Jesus is saying less about his family of birth and more about the family of faith that we choose. He's speaking of an open acceptance of others not based on the whims of chance in biological origin, but rather on the choices and commitments that we make of our own free will.

And one thing we can learn in this challenging passage from Mark's gospel is that the way of Jesus is difficult and can cause conflict and sometimes, it's even dangerous—but that challenge comes with abundant opportunities. When we seek to do what God asks of us, we find that we can do so many things we never even imagined. And in that endeavor, we find family along the way. The found family of God. The chosen family of faith. And in that family, we get to grow and learn and serve together as one body. In that family, we have many religious authorities and blood family members, but we

should welcome others, even and especially the outcast. Like the *Guardians of the Galaxy*, we must find a way to open our doors and our hearts to people who aren't like us, but who are no less deserving of love and no less interested in doing the work of God in the world.

And what's extra special about *this* kind of family is that it's rooted in love of God and neighbor—it's not people we were thrown in with by a biological lottery. We, gathered here today, choose to be here. Look around you. Look at one another. That person you just made eye contact with is part of your family. They are here because they have made the choice to say yes to God and to this church.

Friends, we have a choice. We can do anything we want with our time on Sunday morning. You could be sleeping in, going to brunch, at a sporting event, lounging at home, but instead you're here. You choose these people Sunday after Sunday. We come here to worship God and thereby to be transformed by that powerful, unstoppable force of love only God can provide. We gather to grow together in faith. To be inspired. To find hope. To hear a good word or two that helps the chaos we sometimes experience in this life make some kind of sense. To see our family of faith. To be one body, united in Christ. To overcome the divisions so that our house, the Kingdom of God, can stand. Jesus's prayer is that all will one day be one, Paul expounds in his letters on the breaking down of the divisions between people, that all may be united in Christ. United in love. Love, as the song from Captain and Tennille goes, love will keep us together.

As we begin this journey together, I want to say that I feel so honored to be here among you and to walk with you as one big church family, as a found family whose differences do not divide us, as a family who *chose* to forge forward *together* in faith with the love of the Triune God to guide and unite us. Let us run this race together in hope. Onward.

Amen.