

Sermon Notes – June 6, 2021

(Mark 3:20-22, 31-35)

Many of you have good family relationships. I want to share a true story told about the late Christopher Reeves, who played the part of Superman for many years. You remember that he was in an accident where he fell off a horse. The horse just stopped, he fell off, broke vertebrae in his neck and back, and he was left as a quadriplegic. Four or five days after the accident, he woke up in the hospital. Dana, his wife, was in the room with him and he looked over at her (after the doctor had told him his situation and how bad it was) and he said, “Honey, why don’t you just let me go? Don’t make any trouble for yourselves. Just let me go. Just let me die.” He said, “My wife, without missing a beat, looked me straight in the eyes and said, ‘You are still you and I love you.’” About that time, his children came in and they gave him love and affirmation. He said that it was his family’s love, care, and affirmation that kept him going. One of the reporters said, “Mr. Reeves, don’t you ever just want to give up in the middle of the night when you wake up and think about how bad your situation is? Don’t you want to just pull the plug?” He said, “No, because my family loves me so much, and I want to live as long as I can with them.”

Some of you have strong family ties. But, some of you may have grown up in a family where a parent was an alcoholic, a gambler, or lost all their money. Some of you may have had sibling rivalry in your family. I’m one of seven kids, so you can definitely say there was some sibling rivalry in our family. We were always teasing my mother that she loved my third oldest brother more than the rest of us. You know, there is something always going on in families with kids. Some of you know what it’s like to be in a situation where a parent dies and you have to settle the estate, and all kinds of trouble can brew, can’t it? So, some families are good and strong, and some families have troubles and difficulties.

I wonder why Mark included this story about the rift between Jesus and his earthly family? ... I think there are three reasons, but, let me set a preface for it. Matthew and Luke’s gospels don’t even mention this rift between Jesus and his earthly family. The only part that the writer of the gospel of John says (in John 7) is, “... and his brothers did not even

believe in him at first.” Now, maybe John thought that sounded a little better than what Mark said -- Mark’s family accused him of being “out of his mind.” Can you imagine calling Jesus, the Son of God, “out of his mind?”

Well, there was a family rift and I want to share three reasons why I think Mark included this story in our Gospel lesson. ***I think the first is to teach us that no family is perfect. All families have some difficulties and problems along the way. So, we all have problems. There’s no perfect family - no perfect earthly family.*** Let me explain why they thought Jesus was “out of his mind” and they wanted to protect him from himself and the religious leaders from Jerusalem. Can’t you imagine that Jesus’ siblings got a little upset with him when he left home at age 30? He had been the carpenter’s son; he was the oldest and first born. When Joseph, his father, died, Jesus took over the family - looked after the mother and the kids. But, not only that, he also took care of the family carpentry shop. Can’t you imagine that when he got ready to leave home at the age of 30 to follow God’s call, the brothers said, “Why are you shirking your responsibility? You’re the first born, you’re supposed to take care of mom and us. Who’s going to take care of the carpentry shop?” Don’t you imagine there was a little jealousy, hurt, and anger there? And then on top of that, here is Jesus in this situation where he’s isolating and ostracizing the Pharisees -- he was saying and doing things that they didn’t accept. The Pharisees accused Jesus of being in cohorts with Satan; they were calling the good Jesus did as evil. (You see, blasphemy of the Holy Spirit is when you say that something the Holy Spirit of God does in somebody that is good, and you call it “evil” and of the devil.) The Pharisees accused Jesus of misleading the people and of practicing sorcery. This was embarrassing to Jesus’ family and they came to take him home. His mom and his brothers are upset with him and they say, “He’s out of his mind. He’s overworked. He’s overtired. He’s become a religious fanatic. We need to protect him from himself and the religious leaders.” So, I think Mark included this story to let us know that no earthly family is perfect.

But, I think there is a second and greater reason -- that Jesus redefined what family is. He said that family is not just your bloodlines and your

kinfolks. *When you follow Jesus and seek to do his will, you are part of a larger, spiritual family.* That family is inclusive, not exclusive. Think of the people that Jesus hung around with – the rich, the poor, the prostitutes, the lepers, the sick, the widowed, the children, the women. He hung around all types of people when it wasn't acceptable to do that. His love was inclusive, not exclusive. It was a family in which mercy trumped judgement. It was a family that accepted you where you were. He's never going to leave you that way, but, he accepts you where you are and takes you beyond that. It was a family that experienced mercy and compassion. Jesus was saying to them, "God sent me to tell you that you have a larger, spiritual family" -- and that family may be more important and longer-lasting than your biological family. That's good news for all of us because if you have a good family, you have an even larger spiritual family. If you have no family, or your family has not been able to be there for you, then you have a large, spiritual family.

I want to give you an example of how I experienced family when I was growing up. You know that I lost my family young, and church was very important to me. There were people in that church who encouraged me to come; they gave me a ride to church when I had no ride. My father was sick and couldn't drive; my brothers were working or doing other things, and I had no ride to church. They would come out of their way and drive five, ten, or twelve miles to come and get me and take me to church and bring me home -- Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. There were women in my grandmother's Sunday School class who made me dresses for school. There were women, when I first went off to college, who would send me five or ten dollars in the mail. There were people who sent me cards to say, "We're praying for you, Miss Peggy. We love you and we support you in what God has called you to do." I learned at an early age what church family meant -- that they walk alongside you in the good times and the bad times; they love and care for you; they challenge your assumptions; they push your boundaries. And, that's what Jesus does for us and what the church is to do for us.

I want to tell you some ways that I see you as the family of God. Five years ago, when my youngest brother died with Lou Gehrig's disease and Parkinson's, you walked alongside me. In the months of his illness and in

his death, you walked alongside me -- you sent cards; you prayed; you asked me how he was doing; and you walked through it with me at that funeral. I can't tell you how much that meant to me. Many of you were there. Thank you for being the family of God. I saw you being the family of God" this past year during this COVID pandemic. There were people who needed food dropped off at their home and they weren't your family, but you dropped off food and paper products to them. An older lady in our church had a muddy, ruddy road and you couldn't hardly get in her driveway or out of it. A man in our church and his friend took a load of gravel and put it in her driveway free of charge. I know people in this church who have gone to people's houses and cleaned their gutters for free. I know a man in this church who goes to the Abused Women's Shelter and does maintenance for them with no charge; he does it out of the goodness and generosity of his heart. This past year, you have kept this church going with your presence, your prayers, your contacts, and your financial giving. We could not have done it without you. You have been "the family of God." You have walked alongside people who have afib and cancer. Many of you have experienced these issues yourselves, and you have walked alongside them and encouraged them. I thank you for doing that.

You see, the biggest message that Mark wanted the people of God to know is that you have a larger, spiritual family and God has called us to be that family -- who walks alongside each other, loves and cares for them, and sometimes we can do it in ways that our own biological family can't.

But, then there is another reason why I think Mark included the story of the rift in Jesus' family -- that is because he wanted to set the stage for what happened at the end of the gospels and in the book of Acts. You see, Jesus' family didn't understand what he was going to do. They didn't understand him being the Son of God. You know, you would've thought that Mary would've known because of his birth, what happened, and what the angels told her. You would've thought that Mary would've known when Joseph and Mary took Jesus to be circumcised and the older priest, Simeon in the Temple, said, "This child is destined for the rising and falling of many in Israel and a sword will one day pierce your heart."

That sword was when her son died on the cross. You would think that Mary had some inkling. Maybe she did, but she never told her sons, we don't know. But, Jesus' brothers never did quite understand who Jesus was and what he was about at the time of the family rift.

But, at the end of the gospels and in the book of Acts, it said that when Jesus was resurrected and he appeared to the disciples in the upper room, guess who else was there? ... Mary Magdalene, Mary (the mother of Jesus), and his brothers. And, his brothers went on to believe in him. James went on to become a leader in the church in Jerusalem and to write the book of James. His brother, Judas went on to write the book of Jude in the New Testament. There was reconciliation with that family. They didn't understand what was going on with Jesus at first, but when he died and was resurrected, they understood.

I want to remind you today that all of our families may have some problems, troubles, sibling rivalry, or whatever - even Jesus' family wasn't perfect - his earthly family. But, I want to tell you that you have a larger, spiritual family and you are that family for me and so many in this church and this community. I want to challenge you to continue to grow in being "the family of God." Remember that it's an inclusive family. Think about all the different people that Jesus hung around with - poor, rich, educated, uneducated, Jews, Samaritans, etc. Jesus used the rift in his family as a teachable moment. I don't think he was "anti-family;" he was just saying there is a larger family - the family of God.

So, I challenge you today to be "the family of God." Continue doing what you're doing and even more. Let's continue to bring in people and help them to know what the true family of God is - one that's inclusive, rather than exclusive - one in which sometimes there may be people in that family that we may not agree always. There are conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, liberals -- there are all kinds of people and we may not agree with one another, but we are one in "the family of God" because God includes us all. May we grow in being the family of God, continuing to care for one another. Amen.