

“Family Conflict? Jesus Had it Too”

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Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Mark 3:20-35

Theme: Family, conflict

Occasion: Pentecost 2, Year B

Jesus experienced conflict in his family. Can anybody relate? In today's gospel text we learn his family was so upset by what they saw him saying and doing, they decided to “take charge of him,” because they thought he was out of his mind.

Later we hear that Jesus' family arrived while he was debating with the religious leaders about Satan. Someone told Jesus that his mother and brothers were there. Jesus responded, “My true family members are those who do the will of God.”

There was tension in the air, not only because of the hot debate going on with the religious leaders, but because of conflict with family members. All families have conflict, of some kind or another. The Bible doesn't sugar-coat this fact.

Beginning with the very first family in the Bible, with Adam and Eve and their two sons, Cain and Abel, we see witness of family conflicts. We shouldn't be surprised, then, when conflicts arise even in the best of families. It's a part of our broken human condition, going all the way back to the fall as described in Genesis 3.

Jesus had conflict within his biological family. Some family members thought he had gone over the edge, become a religious fanatic and thrown away security, safety and society's values. To begin with, Jesus had left home and the carpentry business. His departure had directly affected the financial security of his family.

He was the oldest son of a dead father. In Jewish culture, Jesus was responsible for the security of the whole family. Now, he had become an itinerant preacher, which had no security for his family. There may have been some town gossip in Nazareth when that happened. The family was embarrassed by what appeared to be the actions of an irresponsible man.

He had thrown away his personal safety as well. Most people play it safe and that was probably so in Jesus' family. But now Jesus was on a head-on collision course with the orthodox religious leaders of his day. The family was concerned, not just about Jesus' safety, but about their own as well.

They may also have thought he had thrown away their societal values. He was teaching a whole new way of understanding the Torah, emphasizing what he called the values of the "Kingdom of God." He was forming his own little society and expected them to change the world. Put it all together, his family thought he was crazy. They wanted to bring him home before he did any more damage.

Well, if Jesus had conflict and misunderstanding and hard feelings in his family, we should not expect to escape from it either. There are misunderstandings and conflict in every family I know.

There is pain and sorrow, suffering and hardship. Some family members judge others and even hate their own flesh and blood. There is hurt in all families. So what do we do about it?

Some people try to deal with painful family problems by *conflict avoidance*. Of course, this doesn't work very well. When problems are stuffed inside a person, they come out in other ways, like blaming

others, which is also called projection. Every family knows how it feels when blame is misplaced.

In some cases, the best we can hope for is *conflict management*. That happens when one or more family members repent or forgive, but others do not let go of the past.

In this setting the only option is to face the fact we cannot change other people, only ourselves. All we can do is change *our* attitude and be sure we don't get dragged down by the tension caused by those who are still fighting or who have run away.

But we never resolve the conflict by avoidance or fleeing. When we flee, we take our problems with us. How about fighting? Sometimes when we fight, issues get resolved. But often it just makes the situation worse.

Isn't there another way to deal with family conflicts? Yes, there is. It's called facing. Facing means putting your cards on the table, getting the issue out where it can be seen by all, and working through it: talking about it; forgiving when necessary, but facing the issues.

Jesus is in the heat of an argument with the Pharisees when his family shows up. He's told, "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." Jesus brings the family situation to a place where it's possible for there to be a resolution to this family conflict.

"Who are my mother and brothers?" he asked. Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God's will is my mother and sister and brother." He redefines the meaning of family.

Now, we don't see an immediate change in the relationship. But we know that it comes. Over in Acts 1:12, we meet those who had

gathered for prayer after Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension. Want to know who was there?

Those present were the 11 remaining disciples along with the women and *Mary, the mother of Jesus, and his brothers*. His family was there. Somehow, they had seen the light and become followers of the Way. Through forgiveness, they had joined the faith-family.

In this same dialogue, here in Mark 3, Jesus talks about the unforgiveable sin, calling it "blasphemy of the Holy Spirit." Well, what is that? To understand the meaning of this difficult verse, let's look at the nature and job of the Holy Spirit.

The job of the Holy Spirit is to bring us to repentance and reconciliation. The work of the Spirit is to bring us to the point where we are willing to forgive and be forgiven. To blaspheme the Holy Spirit means to stubbornly cling to our own opinion with an unwillingness to forgive and be forgiven.

This hard-heartedness had set like concrete in the hearts of the Pharisees in our story who never repented. That's why resolution never came to the conflict with the religious leaders. The unforgiveable sin is not to repent. God's will is that we repent and be forgiven.

Mary and Jesus' brothers obviously had a change of heart. They repented of their anger towards Jesus and through the gift of forgiveness they were now members of this re-defined family. They were among those devoted to following the Way of Jesus.

Forgiveness is the key to resolving family conflicts. Someone needs to be willing to ask for, or extend the olive-branch of

forgiveness. Jesus' family knew the joy of forgiveness through the power of the resurrected Lord. So did Harold's family.

Harold was a recovering alcoholic. Some years ago he told his pastor that much of the conflict with his wife and children came because he refused to take responsibility for his own life. When he was drinking, he always found fault with family members, friends, and business associates.

"I was a fault-finder," he said. "That always led to conflict and a lot of pain in our family. But once I faced my problems and started accepting responsibility for my own life, everything changed. I found relief through the program of Alcoholics Anonymous. But I found real forgiveness and joy through Jesus Christ."

Repentance through Jesus Christ brings conflict resolution to those who are in the faith-family. To offer forgiveness, even to those who do not repent, is the will of the Lord. Forgiveness is the way to follow Jesus' example. May it be so in each of our lives. Amen.