

Who Are My Mother and My Brothers?

Grace be to you and Peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The message comes to us today from the Gospel of Mark 3:31-35

Then his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Dear congregation!

Jesus is coming home. Our instincts and associations of home and family immediately shape our expectations as to how this event will unfold. Family is important to all of us. Robert Frost summed it up well: "Home is the place where when you have to go there they have to take you in" ("The Death of the Hired Man").

So now Jesus comes home. We want to see how this story will play out in his hometown. Up to this point, even with all the excitement, the reports and the prospects have not been good. He spoke in the synagogue of Nazareth and created an uproar. His teaching was unlike anything the people ever heard before. He broke the laws of ritual cleanliness, he violated the Sabbath, he spoke openly of a kingdom not of this world, he communicated directly and intimately with God.

In a word, he didn't fit the mode. When it became clear that he had no intention of conforming to the expectations of the religious leaders, they began to say, "He is insane." (Mark 3:21)

We pick up the story now, where Jesus' family came to "arrest" him.

In the Greek, the word for restrained is also the word used for arrested. Jesus' family did not understand his ministry any more than the soldiers who arrested him in the garden Gethsemane (Mark 14:46).

Perhaps because they were concerned for him, perhaps because they too thought he was out of his mind. It could also be, since Joseph, Jesus' earthly father, is not mentioned here, that he passed away and Jesus' family is expecting him to take over the responsibilities of the first born to be the "man of the house". That was Jewish law. Jesus' brother James is described in the NT as a strict follower of the law, which could mean that part of Jesus' family steered toward the pharisaic tradition or stood close to it. His brother James would have then compelled Jesus to the law that insisted he now care for the family in Joseph's absence.

When they got there, they found Jesus teaching in a home. The place was packed. People were standing in the doorway and spilling out into the courtyard straining to hear him. Mary and her sons couldn't get in, so they sent word, "Tell the teacher that his mother and brothers are outside." But when Jesus got the message, he said, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then, looking around at the crowd, he said,

"Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, the same is my brother, and my sister, and mother." (Mark 3:35)

"Who are my mother and my brothers?" What do you make of that? On the surface, it seems like such a harsh thing to say. Did Jesus mean to reject his family altogether?

In his book, *The New Being*, theologian Paul Tillich points out the fact that Jesus did not say, "Those outside are not my mother and brothers." In other words, he didn't deny the relationship he had with his biological family; he merely expanded the family circle to include any number of others.

He pointed to spiritual, rather than physical family ties and belonging as the basis for life in the kingdom of God.

The implication is: If sons and daughters of God, then brothers and sisters of one another. The Spirit of God unites us as family in a bond of love. This love is able to withstand the storms of life and lets us see Christ in the face of loving and caring sisters and brothers at times when we need it most.

It transcends the boundaries of age, race, nationality and gender. It encompasses people from every station and walk of life. Being part of God's family means that we are never left alone. We have brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers all around us, even over the whole world. When we are in need of a mother, a father, a sister or a brother, God provides them for us in the arms and faces and hearts of people who love and care for us, people who become Christ for us in our time of need.

How wonderful to be part of this family! And that does not mean that we care less about our own family. Jesus didn't deny the claim of his family on his life, but he did set the limits of their authority over him. And specifically, regarding Mary – Jesus defined the boundaries of parenthood.

This is a difficult word we are hearing, both as children and as parents. From earliest childhood, we're taught to respect our father and mother. It's spelled out clearly in the 4th Commandment:

"Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be long in the land which Yahweh your God gives you." (Exodus 20:12)

But there's a difference between honoring your father and mother and giving them ultimate authority over your life. Parental authority must always be subordinate to the authority of God and His good and loving will for your life.

For one thing, parental wisdom is prone to error and parental love is often tempered by the need to control. After all, parents, however devoted to their children, are only human.

More importantly, while we're children of our parents, we're also children of God, and, as we grow in our relationship to God, we realize God's infinite love and care for us and we are gently called to seek God's will for our lives and follow the leading of God's Spirit, even when it means overriding the wishes of our parents or siblings, for that matter.

It happens all the time: A son chooses a different line of work instead of joining his father's business; a woman chooses to marry a man her parents don't like, much less approve of; couples decide to have children – or not to have children – over their parents' wishes. Yes, honor your father and your mother but, more importantly, trust and allow God to love you and show you the higher goal for which He created you.

There's also a flip side to the coin. If it's hard, as children, to break away from the authority of our parents, it's just as hard, as parents, to cut the apron strings with our children.

Why is it so hard, letting go? Maybe we think, that as long as we're holding on, we feel a sense of importance. You know you're needed. Children give their parents a healthy dose of self-esteem. They also give us a sense of identity. In many ways, to let go of our children is to let go of our own lives – who we are as defined by who we're related to. Then it becomes all important to remember, that we are not defined by who we are related to, but by who we belong to. Our Father in Heaven gives us our ultimate identity as His beloved children.

Of course, there's no expiration date on parenthood – loving parents will always love their children – and vice versa.

But there are boundaries. And to cross the line; that is, to hold on to the dependency of the parent-child relationship is to violate the parental role and thwart the growth and development of the child.

As loving parents, we have to cut the apron strings and insist that our children stand on their own two feet. We have to let go and entrust them to God. This is the goal of healthy parenting – to enable our children to become the men and women God intends them to be, created not in our image, but in the image of God.

Here's the bottom line: Jesus clearly defined the boundaries of parenthood and sibling-hood when he asked the question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" There could be no mistake about it, his relationship to God came first and foremost.

The Good News is that Jesus' relationship with his family did not end here; it simply moved to a new level. Mary became one of Jesus' most devout followers. She was the one who stayed by his side, to the very foot of the Cross, when others deserted him. And his brother, James, while hardly mentioned in the gospels, shows up in the Book of Acts as the leader of the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 15:13; 21:18; Gal. 1:19)

Setting the boundaries of parenthood and family ties opens new possibilities for deeper and more enjoyable relationships for all concerned. All who know God as Father and Jesus Christ, his only begotten son, will be united forever as brothers and sisters, one with another. The concept of an "extended family" has suddenly taken on very wide proportions indeed. Jesus is not advocating hostility toward one's family. He does however, make it clear that loving and following GOD binds us together more deeply than any ties of human bloodlines.

Learning to love and care for those to whom we are bound in faith as deeply as we care for members of our family reorders our priorities and resources. And ultimately this is the will of God: that we all become mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers to one another...

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.