

Genesis 3, Mark 3 June 9, 2024

Phil and I had a wonderful experience a week ago yesterday at a wedding reception in the Twin Cities to which we were invited. The couple involved were Lucas and Jenny Xiong; Lucas is the brother of our daughter-in-law, Galina Xiong Berge. Both Galina and Lucas are members of a large and significant Hmong community within the Twin Cities, and through her marriage to our son, Andrew, Galina has brought us into some connection with this colorful and close-knit community. Which has been extremely educational and joyful, for the most part. Now, if you've followed the math here, what it amounts to is that Phil and I were invited to our daughter-in-law's brother's wedding; not what most of us would consider a particularly close family connection. But I tell you what---the Hmong community is far more aware of family relationships and far more expansive in their definition of family relationships than our culture generally is. As soon as our son and Galina married, this same brother of Galina's began to call me and Phil, "Mom" and "Dad"---and again, he's the brother of our daughter-in-law. But that's how seriously and expansively such relationships are taken within Hmong culture. Our daughter-in-law's mother greeted us at the reception with great warmth and affection and repeatedly told us to remember that we were family to them---even though in this gathering of over 300 people, we were among the possibly a dozen Caucasians present. We didn't look like "family" by many standards, and we couldn't speak Hmong, which was the primary language spoken, but we were family. Because *family* is a far more flexible concept than many of us realize. This is a theme that our Gospel lesson picks up. It's heart-warming to be embraced as a family member, isn't it? But, realistically, no families, whether Caucasian, Hmong, or of any type, are all sentiment and happy faces. Being family has upsides and downsides; it creates both blessings and obligations. We often give our families both the best and worst of ourselves,

which means that families can be experienced as loving or conflictual or usually both. So no need to feel concerned if your family is a mixed bag; all families are! Even Jesus experienced this.

If you look at our lesson this morning from Mark 3, you discover that Jesus seems to be coming into multiple conflicts and upsetting all kinds of people on this particular day. Consider how his family of origin seems to be regarding him. We read, “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” His family, in short, thinks at this point in this gospel narrative that Jesus may be crazy and needs to be restrained. I’m guessing that this is not as unusual as it may sound--- I mean, how many times do we say of a family member, “they must have lost their mind.”? And we marvel at how someone with whom we share a gene pool can be so off base, so unlike ourselves. There can be a humorous aspect to this, but frankly, there can also be a painful aspect. Many of us have lived with either garden variety family dysfunction or actual mental health issues that have made difficult the life of everyone in the family. And it hurts. Families can be havens of all things good, and they can also be the place where we encounter pain; we can feel loved and accepted, and we can feel misunderstood and maligned, and we can feel like our own mental health is jeopardized by others crazy-making behavior. Real life is full of just such families, and so is Scripture, which, contrary to so many romanticized and inaccurate views, is brutally honest in its portrayal of families. Our Scripture lesson today is a case in point---Jesus is regarded, early on in his ministry, as being crazed by his family. And that’s not hard to understand, is it? I mean, what if one of any of our siblings started making the kind of splash that Jesus was making and even claiming authority that typically belonged only to God? Of course, Jesus’s family members must have regarded him as dangerously unbalanced; how else could they feel until his

story played out to the end? And in fact, we know that at least Mary, his Mother, and James, one of his brothers, became disciples, supporters, and then leaders in the early church. But we're only in the 3rd chapter of Mark in our lesson today, and his behavior at this point seems to them to be unbalanced, concerning, and unnecessarily conflictual.

The conflict continues in the next verses of our lesson today, when the scribes pick up where Jesus' family left off. As I said, he's not having much of a day. The scribes publically accuse him of being demonically possessed. We in our day and age are not unfamiliar with political rivals demonizing one another. The scribes are both political and religious leaders, and they have a lot to lose if this radical itinerant preacher rises in the polls. They reason, correctly, that a man who does what Jesus has done---healing the sick, casting out demons---must have a source of super-human power. Since Jesus doesn't fit into their model of a "good Jew" and is not aligning Himself with them, it follows, in their reasoning, that the source of His power *can't* be divine. Therefore, it *must* be demonic, and they make their public accusation. Jesus, of course, is more than able to point out the flaw in their logic. Would one possessed by demons be casting out demons? Wouldn't that be a conflict of interest? If one is casting out evil, one must be empowered by good, by the Holy Spirit. And after presenting this argument, Jesus goes on to state that the scribes are guilty of blaspheming the Holy Spirit through their groundless accusation. He declares that misrepresenting God' healing and redeeming work through the Holy Spirit and instead declaring it *demonic* is unforgivable. He returns their harsh critique with an equally harsh judgement of his own.

Really, we have heard about three conflicts in these few verses: a conflict within Jesus' family, a conflict between Jesus and the authorities, *and* a reference through the exorcisms to the on-going conflict between Jesus and Satan. Most certainly, as Jesus begins to preach mercy, to

restore and heal and forgive, He is coming into conflict with the larger power of evil. I mean, Jesus can't seem to get along with anyone! But, some days are like that, one conflict after another, as we know.

Conflict is, of course, inevitable, as values and priorities clash among people. To the extent that our values and priorities are shaped by our faith, some of the conflicts we experience are shaped by our faith. Millennia of religious wars testify to that reality. Other conflicts are more ideologically, economically, or politically driven, often all of the above. Even within our families, different understandings of faith and values can cause conflict and unhappiness. We grieve that someone who shares our DNA so closely is yet so different from us in belief and/or lifestyle. We marvel at how close relatives can cause so much misery for one another. After all, isn't blood thicker than water?

That little proverb, "blood is thicker than water", can be traced back to the 1100s in Germany. It suggests that generally speaking, common ancestry and the bonds of family are stronger than bonds between unrelated individuals. Conventional wisdom would back up this point of view. Family is family, right? Yet, is this little proverb *always* true? Might we not have closer bonds with non-blood relations, like our spouses, for example, than with blood relations? In point of fact, don't many of us have friends or a community circle that embraces us in a way that we may or may *not* experience with our blood relations? Maybe that seems a little sad, but it's often true. And maybe it's *not* really so sad. Maybe if blood were always thicker than water, our world would be one huge mass of tribal wars and clan-based conflicts. Maybe we *need* to see *beyond* blood relations alone, to see how we share commonality with those beyond literal family. Perhaps it is actually natural and essential that communities form around

common beliefs and values that may at times supersede blood ties. The church of Christ is just such a community.

Jesus creates this understanding with his words when in response to hearing that his mother and brothers await him, he replies “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And then looking at those followers gathered about him, he continued: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Ah...a family system based not on shared DNA, but on shared faith and function---those who believe in God and who act in a way that is part of God’s will, are family. Which is not a bad definition of “church.”

In the best of all worlds, of course, our biological family members would share our faith and values and be a part of both our biological family and our Christian family. That’s a great joy when it happens. But, it doesn’t always happen. We can have parents, siblings, or children who are indifferent to Christian faith or even hostile. And we can’t control that, try though we may or much though we may want to. Everyone’s faith journey is ultimately their own, and between themselves and God; that’s a reality we must accept as gracefully as we can, trusting in God to work in other’s lives in God’s own way and time. And meantime, just as we cherish family members, even if they differ in belief from us, we continue to cherish our faith and community, and to find a particular sense of family within our church.

If the Church, with a capital “C”, is family, then you and I have quite a diverse assortment of relatives. They speak in hundreds of languages, their skin color ranges from dark to pale, their customs and mannerisms might be strange to us. Still-- they are family. Family, as Phil and I just experienced last weekend, does not mean we all look the same or speak the same language. When it comes to the family of the *Church universal*, we are family because we

share a faith in God and seek to do God's will. As in any family, there are conflicts. Conflicts between church bodies, between denominations, between Christian movements. But in spite of and beyond and deeper than the conflicts runs the truth...we are family. And as such, it is our duty and our joy to try to foster understanding and build bridges, to be on our best sibling behavior, rather than to give in to that always human urge to blame, misinterpret, and misrepresent one another when we disagree.

Our Christian family *is* huge and world-wide! And it's also not so huge. This congregation is also family, and though we are larger than most biological families may be, we are small enough to know each other and act as family to one another. That is, in fact, one of the significant strengths of congregations of our size; we can genuinely live out the church as extended family. We can truly help bear one another's burdens and share one another's joys. Our family here isn't perfect either, of course; that's what forgiveness and second chances are for! But living as a community of grace, we become brothers and sisters, grandparents and parents and children to one another, as well as friends. Yesterday, many of us said goodbye to DeWayne Rubedor; he wasn't a blood relation to any of us here this morning, but he was family. In the last few months, we received three new members through Holy Baptism and six new members through joining as adults. Most of us aren't related to any of them, but they are family. One of those new member couples, Alexis and Taylor, had a baby since joining, and that baby, Emmet James Hanson, is not only their child, but a child to all of us, isn't that so? In fact, as I was writing this sermon, Alexis sent me 5 or 6 pictures of baby Emmet via texting---as if I was family! How do you think that made me feel? Like a million dollars, for sure! Emmet's Holy Baptism has already been scheduled for July. Through God's Word and the water, he will become a part of a family that may have ties deeper even than those of blood relationship. When

his baptism is complete and I get to show him off a little, I will say something like, “Here is our newest little brother in Christ. He is ours to love, to support, and to pray for.” Not only will I say it, but I will *mean* it. And you will welcome him into our family of faith, and *you* will mean it, too. Just as we all meant it when we welcomed those three baptized and those 6 adult new members these last weeks. They are all a part of our family of faith. Being a family includes privileges and responsibilities, joy and heartache. Yet, we are family. We are bound together by ties deeper even than blood ties; we are bound together by the love of God in Christ. Being family means that all of us are always welcome here, whether in joy or sorrow; in triumph or defeat, whether healthy or broken or cheerful or irritable, we are welcome here. Family is family, right? In that expanded and gracious definition of family that Jesus gives us. There’s always a place for every member of the family at the table of God, and there is always a welcome place at that table for anyone who seeks it. Amen.