

Just over a year ago, a strange thing happened in my family of origin that had not happened for over 30 years. As of last March, all the surviving members of the family I grew up with, my dad, my older brother, my younger brother and their families all lived in the same state, the same city, practically the same zip code. Not since my brother Nathan moved out to go college in the fall of 1981 had we all been in the same place. Now, I know that does not make us unique, but it does shed some light on my family and on our shared story. Because when Nathan left Florida, he went first to South Carolina, then on to Miami, back to South Carolina, to Mankato to the twin Cities to Louisville Kentucky, Brooklyn, Jersey City before ending up back here in Saint Paul. I went off to Iowa, back and forth twice to Tanzania, to Mahtomedi, to Berkeley, California a third time to Tanzania, back to Berkeley, to Brattleboro, Vermont, to Besançon, France, to Dakar, Senegal for a decade and then here to St. Paul. My brother Michael moved first to Fargo then to Valparaiso, to Sioux Falls, before he went off to Tasmania (yes, he lived in Tasmania when I lived in Tanzania), then Minneapolis, Lansing, Michigan before heading to Berkeley, Oakland, Santa Cruz, LA, San Diego, back to LA before ending up practically down the street from us in St Paul. And my Dad—in addition to being in Virginia and West Virginia has the great distinction of having moved not once, not twice but three times in his adult life FROM Florida TO Minnesota, now living—you guessed it, about a mile or two away from the rest of us in St. Paul.

Again, our family is not unique, and I don't mean to bore you with our details, but I think it does speak to a sort of universal reality about families. We don't usually pick them, but we do have to learn how to live with them, or come to terms with living far from them, whatever the case may be. In our instance, living far from most of my family for nearly all of my adult life, I'd forgotten what it's like to see family not just during planned visits, but running into them at the grocery store. Being on hand for not just the proud moments, but even for some of the more difficult public moments.

This seems to be one of those moments for Jesus and his family, too. Actually, this episode with Jesus interacting with his earthly family is such a great and vivid reminder of the fact that Jesus is not only fully divine but also fully human. You can almost sense his completely earthly feelings of frustration and anguish at his family: even they don't seem to get what he's up to. Can't you even imagine him saying to his mother, his brothers, his sisters: "Guys, cut it out! I'm preaching here!! I'm trying to do the will of God over here, leave me alone!" Seriously, though: here is in many ways as good an example as we get of Jesus being completely human and completely God. He has to attend both with the strenuous demands of his divine calling, as well as the all-too-real expectations of his human family. And so in this particular moment, Jesus seems to be setting aside these human expectations, these obligations of the bloodline to say instead: my family is not who you might think it is. My family are all of those, every one of those who do the will of God.

Now: two things I want to say about this passage at this point: First is that rather odd phrase about blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, the eternal, unforgiveable sin.

There have been some interesting misinterpretations of this text over the years. Some have said that this unforgivable sin is turning your back on your faith. I don't think that's what Jesus is saying here. Some have said that this eternal sin is not properly confessing other sins, owning up to wrongs that you have done. I don't think that is what Jesus is saying here either. Some have even suggested over the years that the unforgivable sin Jesus is mentioning here is suicide—which I'm **sure** Jesus is not saying here, and frankly, I don't know how anyone could come to that conclusion based either on what Jesus is saying here or on what Jesus says and does in the entire record of his words and deeds in his earthly ministry.

No, what Jesus seems to be saying in this passage is *about* the conflict in this passage: he says that those who wrongly, illogically, even laughably accuse Jesus of being the *devil* that those people have committed a great sin in not recognizing that Jesus casts out demons as an agent of God, not as an agent of the devil. Jesus is exasperated at the fact that the people—his own family included—are still so threatened by his ministry as to think that that he is the devil himself. No, he says. I am here to help bind up the devil, to restrain the evil unleashed in the world, and to free you—all of you—from the power the evil one has over this world.

A second thing I want to say, is about the whole metaphor of family as a way of describing the church. It is a good, helpful image for the church, but one that I think we need to hold lightly. Because for some, family can mean that group of people who accept you fully and freely and love you unconditionally. For others, family can be a network of grudging obligation, a matrix of expectation and duty, often with keeping

up appearances as a central tenet of the family code. We in the church can be and often are a family, in the best sense of the word. We provide a sense of community, a sense of belonging for one another. We care for one another, hopefully as well as or at times even better than many earthly families. At the same time, we need to be careful that in talking about the church as a family we are not simply saying that our church community is a group of like-minded people bound together by kinship ties, but that our church community—our church family—is and should be an inclusive, expansive group of people gathered together by the Holy Spirit, in order to do the will of God and to follow Jesus and continue his ministry here and now.

Jesus says, in essence, that he has come to draw others to himself, to form a new community, a new “family” made up of those who do the will of God. Those who do the will of God, he says, these folks are the ones I consider to be my sisters, my brothers, my relatives, my friends. And just what does it mean to “Do the Will of God?” Well, according to the gospel of Mark, it means quite simply to follow Jesus. To stick with him, to stay with it, through thick and thin—times of certainly and doubt, times of fruit-bearing and reward, times of rest and silent growth. Doing the will of God, according to this gospel witness, is not seeking moral perfection—that endless list of dos and don’ts that some would have us believe are the truest marks of faith. Doing the will of God is being tuned into what God is saying, where God is leading, what God is already up to in the world around us.

When confronted with Jesus’ teachings, with his healings, and his casting out of demons, those in power being to feel threatened. They want to get rid of him. If he

will not conform to the way we have constructed our world, they say, he should be excluded from it. If he acts to disrupt the world we have created—the world in which we are in charge—then declare him insane and restrain his activities.

Otherwise, they say, Jesus will shatter our world with his words.

Still, people gather around him. People hungering for acceptance crowd into the place where he is. There is good news being shared here, and they hear it gladly.

There is liberation and healing happening here and the folks who need such things simply eat it up. And, to be sure there might not even be among this crowd any of the natural affinities of family, tribe, language, or even congregation or denomination. Some of them, many of them, couldn't care less about such things.

What they do know, what they latch onto is that in this new gathering, this new “family,” ***Christ*** is the center. Not bloodlines or ethnicities. Not subdivision or zip code. Not school district or voting precinct. Not income bracket or party affiliation. Christ is the center of their new world. Here are the ones who have come in faith to be healed. Here is the place where the world has been shattered and reformed.

Here, too; in these pews, at this font, around this table, as we are woven together, with blessed ties that bind, our divisions overcome, our backgrounds and origins important but not predominant, our common ground in Christ, who gathers us to grow, grows us to give of ourselves. Look around you. Go ahead, look! It is to all of us that Jesus says, just as he said back then, “Here are my sisters and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister, my relative, my friend.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.