

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Gathering of Relatives

Mark 3:20-35

"Then Jesus entered a house." That's the way this morning's Scripture passage begins. But we know that a house is not always the same thing as a home. A house is the physical structure where you're located. A home is the emotional space where you have a sense that you belong, that you're loved. When you're at home, you inhabit a closely knit network of relationships that give meaning and purpose to your life. During the course of this week, millions of people will be headed to a house. But most of all they'll be headed to a home.

Not a perfect home, by any means. But still, a place where they'll feel received and cherished. A place where they'll be taken in, and experience a sense of dignity and worth, and when necessary, forgiveness. So it is in Robert Frost's poem, "The Death of the Hired Man." An undependable hired man named Silas has returned to Warren and Mary's farm, where he has worked for many years. Because Silas is a vagabond with no settled life, and tends to disappear when he's most needed during the busiest season, Warren isn't very receptive to the idea of his return. But Mary helps Warren see what she senses, that Silas has actually come home to die. Warren is surprised to hear Mary use the word "home," since Silas isn't related to them by blood, and thus isn't technically "family." That's when Warren offers his own definition of home. In one of Robert Frost's most memorable lines, Warren says, "Home is the place, when you have to go there, / They have to take you in."

At this point in Mark's Gospel, Jesus' family would love to have to take him in. The problem is, he doesn't show up at their door very much. He spends so much of his time on the road, preaching and teaching his message about the arrival of God's kingdom, that he seems less and less a part of the family. Doesn't he remember the responsibilities that come with being a son, including finding steady work and a stable income to help with the family finances? And why does he keep offending the leading religious authorities, the very ones whom he was taught to respect and learn from? Here of late, conflict seems to follow Jesus wherever he goes. And to top it off, he spends so much of his time keeping what many regard as bad company with people who aren't exactly the most holy folks in the community. It's as if he's trying to assemble and organize another family that takes priority over his own blood kin.

So Jesus' family decides that it's time for an intervention. Having concluded that "He's out of his mind" (v. 21), they show up at the house where Jesus is teaching, prepared to take their demented loved one and bring him back home. But the size of the crowd keeps them from getting to him. All they can do is stand outside and send someone in with word of their arrival. "Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you." Like any good teacher, Jesus knows how to ask good questions. But this one has a certain edge to it. "Who are my mothers and brothers?" he asks. "I don't need to go home. I'm already at home, right here, with these people seated around me. They're my family." To which he adds, "Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother" (vv. 33-35).

So much for Mary's hope of a family photo that she can use on her Happy Hanukkah cards. Clearly, Jesus has very different ideas about what it means to be one of his relatives. He redefines his family as a community of people bound together, not by ties of blood, but by a commitment to doing the will of God.

In a service like today's, the congregation usually includes some people who are part of the baptism candidate's biological family and many others who are part of the individual's faith family. And some folks are members of both. You'll notice that we don't have the baptism candidate's blood relatives stay in the lobby and peek through the windows of the sanctuary doors during the service, as if to say, "Your loved one now belongs to us, so you'll need to stay on the outside. We'll take things from here." No, even after someone gets baptized, genetics still matter.

But here in the context of Christian worship, the stress is on the person's ties to Jesus and to the fellowship of disciples being formed by Jesus. That's because baptism signifies a believer's welcome into the household of faith. It marks the beginning of his or her life as a child of God within the family of God. This doesn't mean ignoring or casting aside the parents and siblings of the person being baptized, as if they're now out of the picture. It simply means that the primary claim on a believer's life is God's claim, and that the believer's primary loyalty is to God's kingdom. It means that because of God's saving work in the death and resurrection of Jesus, water is actually thicker than blood.

Notice the difference in the way Jesus defines family. For Jesus, family is less about DNA and more about discipleship. His relatives are "those who do the will of God" (v. 35). In other words, those who hear and respond trustingly and obediently to the announcement that God's long-awaited reign has arrived on the scene. Those who identify themselves with Jesus and follow him in their lives. Doing so will inevitably be disruptive, because what God is doing in and through Jesus is so radical and new that it can't be contained or mediated by the existing structures of life, including your birth family.

In fact, a person's birth family may actually react negatively and resistantly to a Jesus follower's commitment. On another occasion of baptism earlier this year, many of you heard me tell a story related by a pastor named Jim Denison. While he was in college, he served as a missionary in East Malaysia. During that time he attended a small church. At one of the church's worship services, a young girl came forward to announce her decision to follow Christ and be baptized. During the service, Denison noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the church, so he asked the pastor about it. The pastor pointed to the young girl who had just been baptized and told Denison, "Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian she could never go home again. So she brought her luggage."¹

Certainly, most new believers don't encounter that kind of rejection from their birth family. Here in today's Scripture passage, the tone of Mark's narrative doesn't seem to suggest a violent break between Jesus and his family. But it does give us a window into the lives of many in Mark's audience who had experienced some degree of family crisis because of their faith in Jesus. When the time came for their baptism, very few, if any, members of their birth family showed up for the service. Which also means that after the service, there were no family photos.

On one of the walls in our vestibule is a picture of our congregation taken just over ten years ago on the occasion of our church's fiftieth anniversary. It's essentially a family of God photo. If you took that picture, or an updated version of it, and placed it alongside a picture of you with your birth family, how would you assess the relationship between the two families? Do they share the same vision and essential convictions about God and God's

purposes in the world? Do they mutually strengthen and enrich one another? Do they collide or clash with one another? Do they seem disconnected and distant from one another, as if they're two separate worlds? I'm not trying to turn you against your relatives, or minimize the value and importance of family. I know firsthand the positive role that family can play in the life of faith. And I realize that the way you answer these questions about the family photos may need to be carefully nuanced depending on which individuals or relationships you focus on within the pictures. But even so, this kind of imaginative exercise can help us think afresh about what God has done, and what you're doing, when you profess faith in Christ and get baptized.

Baptism isn't simply a mild and sweet rite of passage for the spiritually inclined. It's an occasion when the Lord who says to you, "Follow me," also says, "And now that you've attached yourself to me for life, I want you to meet your relatives." When I give Angela her baptism certificate, what I'm actually giving her is a birth certificate. Birth into a new family. Her primary family. Water is thicker than blood.

You've probably heard that you can't choose your family. That applies to the family of God as well. Jesus is the one who calls and assembles his community of disciples. He's the one who gets to decide who your relatives will be. Writer and NPR commentator Heather King, reflecting on her faith in Christ, says:

But we don't come to church to be with people who are like us in the way we want them to be. We come because we have staked our souls on the fact that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and the church is the best place, the only place, to be while we all struggle to figure out what that means. We come because we'd be hard pressed to say which is the bigger of the two scandals of God: that he loves us—or that he loves everyone else.²

Later this week, as you gather for Thanksgiving, many of the people at your table will be tied to you by blood. Others may not be connected to you by genetics, but they're still "family" to you. There's a story about a young man who forgot to notify his grandmother, Wanda Dench, about a change in his cell phone number shortly before Thanksgiving. So when Wanda texted him inviting him over for a Thanksgiving meal, her text accidentally went to another young man, 17-year-old Jamal Hinton. The two figured out the mistake pretty quickly, but Jamal asked if he could "still get a plate." In grandmotherly fashion, Wanda responded, "Of course you can. That's what grandmas do." When asked about the encounter, Jamal said, "I'm thankful for all the nice people in the world. I never met her . . . and she welcomed me into her house, so that shows me how great of a person she is."

Today, as we celebrate Angela's baptism, and affirm her in her faith, we remember that there are connections in life that transcend blood lines. There's a household that's much greater than the walls of your particular residence. It's a household that requires you to expand your love and loyalties, and welcome all those who say yes to the call of Christ and to the good news of God's kingdom. It's the household of faith, comprised of all Jesus' relatives. Jesus says that whoever does God's will is a member of his family. So Angela, and all of you gathered here today, look around you right now. Scan the room. These are Jesus' relatives, your family. They share a spiritual DNA with you. And together with you, they want to follow the Lord and do his will.

¹ Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001) 48.

² Heather King, "The Better Church," *Shirt of Flame* blog (October 23, 2011).