

“We are Family”

Many people treat the Bible like a book of rules for how to live a good life. There are certainly portions of the Bible that are intended in that way. What scholars call wisdom literature falls into that category. The most obvious of these books is the Book of Proverbs. Much of this book is one or two sentence words of wisdom. Such as, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.”¹ Or “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.”² You get the picture.

However, I think the questions that the Bible raises are much more compelling. Rules tend to be static. There is nothing to think about or consider unless we are trying to find a way around a rule. Questions, on the other hand, are to be pondered. They call out to us to use our God-given ability to think. Even the biblical rules when pondered at more than face value are offers to reason about what is meant by them. For example, in this time between Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, what does it mean to “honor your father and your mother”?

There are numerous compelling questions in the Bible. Questions such as “Am I my brother’s keeper?”³ “Who is my neighbor?”⁴ and today’s question, “Who are my mother and my brothers.”⁵ These questions are gripping because they hit so close to home. These are not questions about “Life, The Universe and Everything.”⁶ They are questions about how do we live faithfully and genuinely as human beings. They come up in a religious context, but ultimately they go beyond the religious. An atheist can ask these same questions and they might arrive at the same answers as we do. They may do so outside of the realm of faith, but they realize they are questions of importance and consequence nonetheless.

The questions named above are about how we treat those who are close to us. These questions are about how we want to be treated by those close to us. They are also about who exactly are our family, friends, and neighbors. They are questions about what it means to be human and live among others not as hermits but as part of a society and culture.

In today’s reading from Mark, Jesus’ family, thinking that he has gone mad, seeks to gather around him and draw him back in. They care for him and want to protect him. What they do not realize is that he is very much himself and doing exactly what he is supposed to do. Families’ and others may have the best intentions, but their concern may still be misguided.

¹ Proverbs 16:18 NRSV

² Proverbs 9:10 NRSV

³ Genesis 4:9b

⁴ Luke 10:29b

⁵ Mark 3:33 NRSV

⁶ Title of a book by Douglas Adams

When Jesus hears that his family is there to rescue him from himself, he redefines for his listeners the meaning of family. Family is not just blood relations. In this new world that Jesus is preaching and teaching about his family is those who do the will of God. Not doing the will of God is cause for alienation and breaking of traditional familial ties. It seems mundane to us brought up in a society that prizes individualism, but to Jesus' audience this was a radical notion. Ties of family, neighborhood, and tribe had been important from time immemorial. Jesus was saying that those ties do not matter if God's will is not in the mix.

Jesus' notion of family has direct implications for the three questions from earlier. We are to be our brother's or sister's keeper even when we are at odds with them as Cain and Abel were at odds with each other. We are to act like neighbors even to those we fear as enemies for they may be our salvation and we may be theirs. When all is said and done, we are to make our family of those who love God and seek to do what God asks of them. That is why we call those with whom we worship our brothers and sisters and our church family.

Here we are today returned home like those who have been exiled to a strange land. We are back together in our familiar house to worship, pray, sing, commune and after a while to eat and drink and socialize. We are like the sheep which have been scattered whom the shepherd has regathered as one flock. We are called together in the name of Holy God for the purpose of being a people to be strengthened by these practices and by the ties that bind us in the sweet spirit of this place.

Let us never again take for granted the privilege we have to join together as a holy community—a holy family. Let us also remember that we are not an insular family. Rather we are a family without borders that welcomes one and all to fellowship at our table of love and embraces all into its heart. There is no scarcity of love here. In this family love grows with each new member welcomed into it. That is how Jesus was, how we are called to be, and how we live out the best of our family life in Christ.