

The Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 6, 2021

Genesis 3:8-15
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
MARK 3:20-35

JESUS' FAMILY

Even before the pandemic, America had an epidemic of *loneliness*. Increasing numbers of people lived in single person households and/or far away from their extended family — if they had any. Fewer people lived long-term in neighborhoods or communities where people knew each other for years. Fewer people worked for a single company for a career. (Yes, it did happen sometimes.)

The increasing individualization and atomization of American society is contrary to our *biological make-up* as homo sapiens, as is explained in the January/February, 2021 issue of *Discover*, a science magazine for non-scientists. Professor Julianne Holt-Lunstad, a professor of Psychology at Brigham Young University is quoted there as saying, “The brain has adapted to expect the proximity of others. So when we lack [that], it creates a sense of needing to be more alert to challenges in our environment that need to be dealt with on our own.”

The magazine writer adds, “This heightened alertness has a direct effect on our bodies. It can cause increases in blood pressure, heart rate, stress hormones and inflammation levels — all of which threaten our life expectancy. In a 2010 study co-authored by Holt-Lunstad, researchers found that a lack of social connections is comparable to, and often more harmful than, obesity, physical inactivity and other well-known mortality risks. For example, the health effects of loneliness have been likened to the consequences of smoking 15 cigarettes a day.”

And then came the pandemic.

Suddenly, “social distancing” was a survival strategy at the most visceral level. People who lived together in extended family groups were *more* vulnerable to serious illness and death. Finding the best “cave” in which to ride out the pandemic physically isolated from others became desirable, if totally unattainable for billions of people.

What does the Bible say to us as we begin to emerge from this cataclysm?

We human beings were and are called by God to be *connected* to God and to each other in ***holy, wholesome and mutually supportive ways***. Way back in the primeval stories of the human race in Genesis 2:18, we hear God say, “It is not good for the man to be alone.” If we read the passage immediately after those words carefully, we will see that in God’s original design for Creation there was trusting intimacy between people and God and between people, and no subordination of women to men.

That primeval, peaceful intimacy was shattered by human disobedience, as described in today’s passage from Genesis. Living in the Garden of Eden was not good enough for our mythic forebears, who are *us*. We wanted to be in complete charge, usurping God, with no rules.

The result of our primal disobedience was broken relationship with God, with each other, and broken relationship with the Creation. We are reaping the harvest of all three kinds of brokenness to this day. As a result, often we want to cry out along with the psalmist, “Out of the depths have I called to you, O Lord.”

In response, over the millennia since Abraham and Sarah, God has invited human beings to **choose** *holy, wholesome and mutually-supportive ways* to live with each other and with God.

It’s been a bumpy ride, and still is. But in today’s Gospel, Jesus offers us a ride in a “4 wheel drive vehicle” to help us get over the bumpiest roads: ***membership in his family***. By Mark 3, Jesus has gathered disciples, healed people, preached, taught, gotten in big trouble with the authorities and finally his mother, brothers and sisters come to him, fearful that he’s “lost it.”

Ever have a time in *your* life when your parent or sibling thought you were nuts? Jesus understands. He’s been there.

Jesus announces to all in today’s Gospel: “Anyone does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” WOW.

Today, people can experience being part of Jesus’ family by doing the will of God as members of holy, wholesome and mutually-supportive Christian communities, including ones as accessible as regular local churches. So, some more church stories.

In 1979 I was a first year seminarian and a member of All Saints’ Episcopal Church, Brookline, Mass. As a preacher, I was not even a “rookie” yet, but my rector boldly asked me to preach on *Mother’s Day*.

Mother's Day is a very emotionally loaded day. For some, it's a celebration of love for their mothers and of love from their mothers. For others, not so much. In families which are estranged or in which there is domestic violence, the day is very painful. It is painful also for those mothers who have suffered the deaths of one or more of their children, as well as for children who are mourning their mother. It is painful for women whose fiances died, or who were never able to have children, or who never married and wished they had.

How can the Christian faith speak to these complicated cultural realities? Sometimes, through paradox.

One of the assigned biblical texts for Mother's Day that year was the story from Acts Chapter 8 of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch — a castrated man. To be read that Mother's Day.

In my sermon I said that this man never had any "children in the flesh," but that he has had millions of "children in the *faith*" who have been inspired by his story for over 1,900 years. Therefore, even if we don't know our biological ancestors, we can "adopt" him (and others) as our *spiritual* ancestors, and whether or not we ourselves have "children in the flesh" we can, like him, have "*children in the faith.*"

After the service, an elderly, childless spinster lady came up to the Rector, her eyes brimming with tears. She swept her arms around the whole church and told him, "*Today I found out how big my family is.*"

If you're part of the church, you're in Jesus' family.

Sometimes, we need to know not only that we belong, but how that can help us in concrete ways.

I was the Interim Rector at St. Mark's Church, Plainfield, the largest all-Black church in our diocese, in 2013-15. One Ash Wednesday I decided to do one of my interactive sermons with the children and teens, who could join with me in explaining to the whole congregation what this day was all about.

I gathered the kids and teens in front of the altar, where there was a cardboard box flanked by a recycling bin on one side and a trash can on the other. I explained that I wasn't going to ask anyone to give up chocolate for Lent (great relief all around), rather, I was going to ask people of all ages to give up certain *behaviors* for Lent, and to reaffirm other ones.

In the cardboard box were pieces of paper with behaviors written on them. The kids, teens and I would collectively decide which behaviors to “trash” and which behaviors to “treasure.” The “treasured” behaviors would go in the recycling bin to be recycled. “Praying,” for example, gets treasured, “Lying” gets trashed, and so on.

I invited all the kids to open the box and each pull out a word. The first one to do so and raise his hand was a developmentally disabled little boy. The sign he held read, “Bullying.”

I took a deep breath and asked the kids and teens, “Are we going to *treasure* this behavior or *trash* it?”

The oldest and biggest teenaged boy immediately declared, “We’re gonna *trash* that one.” All the kids nodded, the little boy put the paper on the floor and everyone stomped on the paper and put the scraps in the trash.

If you’re in Jesus’ family: got you back, little bro’.

That’s what holy, wholesome, mutually supportive community does.

Sometimes, people who have never experienced such community are deeply hungry for it, eager to be invited in.

In 2010-11, I was the Interim Rector at St. Stephen’s Church in Riverside, New Jersey, a small Burlington County town whose most prosperous years were decades ago.

To get to know people, I did some old-fashioned individual pastoral calls, sometimes being invited to their homes for a meal. One family who hosted me consisted of a ten year-old girl and her grandmother and great-grandmother. Unprompted, the girl explained to me, “I don’t know who my father is and I don’t know where my mother is.”

But she knew who her Father in heaven is, and that she was a full member of Jesus’ family, a holy, wholesome and mutually-supportive community. And she was eager to open the door to Jesus’ “4 wheel drive vehicle” to others. Hey, life can be hard; why try to go it alone?

She asked me if she could be the Greeter at church on Easter Sunday. Sure.

Easter Sunday, she put on her best dress and got to church early, right after the Altar Guild had unlocked the building. Shortly before the service, I was vesting in the sacristy and she bounced in excitedly [I jump up and down] saying “Father Frank! Father Frank! *We have newcomers!*”

She grabbed my hand and led me to the newcomers, who were a single dad and his autistic daughter. “Could we, would you let us worship with you today? Because it’s Easter?” The last church they tried didn’t want them. We said, “Absolutely. Come on in.” While I finished getting ready for the service, our all-star Greeter gave them a tour of the church and introduced them to people. Welcome in the name of Jesus Christ to **Jesus’ family**. Everybody needs the chance to be part of a holy, wholesome and mutually-supportive community.

You’ll notice that all of these stories took place in worship *in the church buildings*. Zoom and Facebook are great. They’ve helped us enormously in getting through the last 15 months in so many ways, and they will continue to be resources for us. But, they are not the same as *being here*.

The pandemic is not yet over, but New Jersey is in radically *better* shape and *safer* now than it was even two months ago.

So, I invite as many as can to be physically present *together* in the weeks to come to celebrate being part of Jesus’ family in person, a membership which is vital to our health and well-being. Worship online will continue to be an option, but *in person* we’re much more likely to hear people say, “Today, I realized how big my family is,” “Got your back, little bro”, and “Welcome ! We’re glad you’re here.”

Welcome to the meal for Jesus’ family. George Harrison could have been talking about the last year when he sang, “It’s been a long, cold, lonely winter,” but as *Jesus* says, “Anyone who does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Welcome to the warmth of his love.

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