

Pentecost 2, Proper 5B, 061012
All Saints Episcopal Church

Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

In the name of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Well, here we are at the beginning of the long season of the Sundays after Pentecost. The season of green and growing things...Ordinary time...and finally, we're back to reading from the Gospel of Mark. I don't know about you all, but Jim and I are glad to be through with John for a good while - it's hard to listen to him for so many Sundays in a row, and harder still to preach on his writings for such a long time. So, welcome back to Mark!

Although - and I don't want to be a complainer - it would have been more appealing to have a kinder, gentler reading from Mark to kick things off. Instead, we are faced with a lesson that takes place early in Mark's narrative that talks about huge crowds surrounding Jesus, people who hear about his message and think he's lost his mind, and others who think that he is doing what he does because he is possessed by the devil. And to top that off, when Jesus' mother and brothers come to get him and take him back home because of the crazy talk, he says they aren't his family! Good grief!

So let's talk about the family - Jesus' family, our families - yours and mine - and God's family. In order to do that, we need to talk about dysfunctional families. I remember a newspaper cartoon that my sister sent me years ago. It was a picture of an auditorium and a stage. There is a podium on the stage, and a man is standing at the podium. There is one person in the audience, about halfway back. And above the stage is a huge banner that reads: National Association of Functional Families. As if that wasn't funny enough, Martha had written on the side of it: "And those two are in denial!"

Now, I'm not trying to offend anyone, but there is no such thing as a functional family. All of us belong to a dysfunctional family, including Jesus, because he was human, too. None of us is perfect, therefore none of our relationships is perfect,

either. It's just the degree to which we are dysfunctional that is different from family to family.

In every family, one of the things that is supposed to happen is that children - sons and daughters both - are supposed to grow away from the family in order to have the chance to grow fully into the people they are supposed to be. I don't mean they have to reject their families; they just have to become independent, to learn to function on their own, to grow up. This growing away from the family begins at various ages. For Jesus, it began, as far as we know, when he was twelve and was in Jerusalem with Mary and Joseph; he visited the synagogue and began teaching the elders there, and then decided to stay for several more days after Mary and Joseph returned home, saying he needed to be about his father's business.

In today's lesson, Jesus is an adult and has begun his ministry - begun it, in fact, with a bang! He is a radical for his time and place, and he upsets everyone, including his disciples and his family members who loved him. How does he do that? We know all those answers: he heals on the Sabbath; he raises people from the dead, he hangs out with SINNERS for God's sake, and he preaches about a God of love and forgiveness and compassion.

So when his family hears about what he is saying, they are afraid for him. If he has lost his mind, he will be in danger. They'd better hurry up and get home so they can protect him. They don't understand him, but they love him. The scribes, on the other hand, are mad about what Jesus is doing, because he is disrupting the status quo; the people are going to get different ideas about how things should be and upset the apple cart. So they start spreading around the idea that he is evil - inhabited by a demon and employed by Satan.

When Jesus' mother and brothers get to the place where he is working, the crowd is so big that they cannot get into the house. They send in a message that they are here, but Jesus replies - and this is part of his growing away from his family - he says, "Who are my mother and brothers? Why, these people right here are my mother and brothers." Imagine how hurtful that must have been, especially to Mary. But then he adds, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Was he really rejecting them? No, what was happening was a rearrangement in the order of his relationships; and, of course, that rearranged the order of our

relationships, too. All of us here are, or were, sons and daughters; some of us are brothers or sisters, mothers, fathers, friends, neighbors. But all those relational definitions are secondary to the one over-arching relationship we have as children of God, brothers and sisters of Christ. And no matter how much things might change between us and our earthly families, that relationship will never be taken away from us.

So how do we get over feeling abandoned or alone or guilty or angry when our loved ones learn to become independent from us, even though we know that is what is supposed to happen? We can learn to embrace the new family configuration, too.

There was a 6th Century monk from Gaza named Dorotheos. In one of his homilies, he invited his listeners to imagine a circle with a center point and straight lines stretching from points on the circle toward the center point.

"The straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings," Dorotheos said. "...To move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference along the various radii of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God."

And one of the best parts, in my opinion, is that there is no limit to the number of lines that can be drawn in the circle!

With persistence, Jesus worked throughout his ministry to draw his hearers deeper into this circle. He defined the circle not as a place for folks who have a shared resemblance, or who think the same way, or who hold all the same beliefs in common. The circle goes deeper than friendship. It is family.

Jesus knows what it means to be family. He is not disrespecting his family of birth here; it is from them, after all, that he first learned to treasure the bonds of kinship, bonds that he now draws upon as an image and model for the relationship he seeks to have with us. Jesus simply has a notion of kinship that goes deeper and broader than ours often does. Jesus traces his circle wide, calling us all to be kinfolk to him by doing what God desires us to do. And if kinfolk to him, then kinfolk to one another, with all the delights and difficulties that come in learning to be a family.

So how might we be brother and sister and mother to Jesus in our time and place? It might be giving away more than we hold onto or acting with more grace, thinking with less judgment, loving with fewer restrictions. That being said, just getting resistance for one's beliefs is not proof that you and Jesus are on the same page. In these days there is much that works to divide us, to tear us apart and turn us away from one another. So, may we instead draw closer to each other as we stretch toward the God who lives at the center of the circle, and who somehow encompasses it—and us—all around.