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All Saints Episcopal Church

When I was in junior high, I went to a summer camp with some friends from school. The camp was in the middle of nowhere, southeast of Nashville on the Stones River, until the Corps of Engineers built the Percy Priest Dam on the river in 1968. Located not too far from the camp, but not flooded by the lake, is the Stones River National Battlefield, site of a major battle of the Civil War.

I didn't know anything about that battle or its place in the history of the Civil War when I went to the camp, but other people did, apparently - or perhaps it was 'too soon' following the Northern Aggression for Southern sensibilities to be anything other than they were. At any rate, we always sang all sorts of songs in the dining hall after every meal; one of the most frequently sung songs was 'Dixie.' I'm embarrassed to say we jumped to our feet when we sang it, as if it were the National Anthem!

One day a man who was one of the camp directors and the father of a girl in my cabin, asked me if I was a 'true' southerner. "Where was I born?" he asked. I told him and asked why he had asked. He said, "Because you sure don't sound like a southerner!"

It was the equivalent of the classic line: "you ain't from around here," but maybe not as bad as "you went off and got different!" When Jesus goes home in the Gospel lesson for today, that's pretty much what he gets from his family and from the community he grew up in. They knew who he was - he was Mary's boy, he was James' brother - but something was different about him, something was wrong. He had changed somehow.

If we remind ourselves of the way the Gospel of Mark goes, we know that right off the bat, Jesus is baptized by John and is blessed by God and anointed by the Holy Spirit. Then he begins a whirlwind tour through Galilee - announcing the presence of the kingdom of God; summoning some fisher folk to follow - who practically leap out of their boats in obedient response; teaching with amazing authority in a synagogue; healing a number people and overpowering the demonic spirits inhabiting them - and all with witnesses by crowds of people who begin to follow him around.

Then he went home. Many, many people crowded around him. You can imagine the small-town gossip machine getting its momentum as they gathered to listen. Eventually a woman arrives at the room in back of the carpenter shop. "Mary," she says, "I saw your boy down by the well. Yeah, Jesus, the one that went off to be a preacher. He sure does talk funny - sounds like those city folks he's been hanging around with! Well, it's not really how he talks, it's what he says! That boy of yours has got some funny ideas. Some people are talking like he's nuts or something. You better do something about it."

So Mary gathered up the family and set out to find her first-born and get him out of trouble. Two reasons were behind her actions: the first because Mary and James and the others lived in Nazareth, and whatever Jesus did and said reflected on them. They wanted to keep their family honor; and they had a business to run. The second reason - probably first in priority - because they all loved Jesus. They didn't get what he was doing, but they loved him anyway. When they found Jesus, the family discovered that things were worse than they thought. Not only was Jesus talking funny and doing strange things; he was also openly defying the public officials, arguing in public with the temple scribes. This was serious business indeed.

The scribes were accusing Jesus of being a Satanist, of being in league with the devil. Can you imagine the fear in the pit of Mary's stomach when she heard people saying that her sweet, precious, first-born son was not only crazy but that he was also evil? And Jesus only made it worse by arguing with the scribes, by making them look like fools.

Mary had to act and act quickly. She sent in one of the boys with a message for Jesus to come out and go home. And Jesus, unbelievably, rejected his mother and her pleas.

Jesus turned his back on his family. He looked around the crowd and said, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Here are my mothers and my sisters and my brothers; those who do the will of God!"

In that moment, Jesus redefined for all time the meaning of family. It was shocking then and it is shocking to many of us now.

For the people of Jesus' time and place, family was not just an important thing; it was everything. Who you were, what you did, who you married, your entire relationship to society and to God were defined by your family. Jesus was not just Jesus-who-used-to-be-a-carpenter in Nazareth and was now a Rabbi. No, Jesus was Jesus, Son of Joseph, of the house and lineage of David, a descendant of Abraham.

Without those family connections, Jesus would have been nobody, at least not anybody who had to be recognized or dealt with. But then he went off to be a preacher and teacher and amazing things started happening. He became permanently "not from around here." He had "gone off and got different."

You have probably heard it said that "blood is thicker than water," but in that moment that Jesus rejected his family, he declared that "the waters of baptism are thicker than the blood of family."

Now, this did not mean that Jesus no longer loved "his Mama and them;" it did mean that Jesus declared a rearrangement in the order of his relationships and by so doing, rearranged the order of our relationships, too.

I am still a sister and aunt and 'Gigi' and friend and priest and neighbor to many -- and probably am considered a 'pain' by some people - you don't have to tell me if I am on the way out. But all those relational definitions are secondary to the ultimate defining relationship: I am a child of God and sister of every one of you. And this is true about me and you and everyone else on this planet. Our relationship with God takes priority over all others and makes sense out of all others. As long as we remember that, everything else is right.

There is a story I've heard told before that helps to illustrate how we are all part of the same family. It is about the Emperor Franz Josef I of Austria. His family, the Hapsburgs, had ruled much of Europe for more than 600 years. He died in 1916 after 68 years on the throne, and after a state funeral in Vienna, with all the attending pomp and circumstance, his body was taken in procession to the Imperial Crypt, a burial chamber beneath the Capuchin Church and monastery.

The Capuchins are a Franciscan order, known, of course, for their simplicity and for solidarity with the poor and common people. The monastery in Vienna was founded in 1618 and the Imperial Crypt has been the principal place of entombment

for members of the Hapsburgs since 1633. While those two facts seem to be at odds with each other, it is the traditional dialogue known as the "Knocking Ceremony" which is carried out at the entrance to the crypt before the burial of every member of the Imperial Family. The monks are the guardians and caretakers of the crypt.

Dignitaries and elegantly dressed royal mourners lead the procession down winding narrow stairs while somber music is played by a military band. At the bottom of the stairs are great iron doors leading to the crypt. Behind the door is the Prior of the monastery.

The Commanding Officer knocks on the door three times and says, "Open!"

The Prior replies, "Who desires entry?"

"We bear the remains of his Imperial and Apostolic Majesty, Franz-Josef I, by the grace of God Emperor of Austria, King of Hungary, Defender of the Faith, Prince of Bohemia-Moravia, Grand-Duke of Lombardy" And so on, through the entire list of his 37 titles.

"We do not know him," says the Prior.

The officer knocks three times again.

The Prior replies, "Who desires entry?"

The officer says, "We bear the remains of Emperor Franz-Josef I of the Hapsburg line."

"We do not know him," says the Prior again.

Once again, the officer knocks three times.

The Prior replies, "Who desires entry?"

This time the officer replies, "We bear the body of Franz-Josef, our brother, a sinner like all of us."

At once the doors swing open and the Prior says, "Then let him come in." And Franz-Josef is welcomed home.

Whoever else we may be, whatever other relationships we may have, there is one title and one relationship that can never be taken away from us; we are always children of God, born out of the waters of baptism and sealed with the Holy Spirit forever.

It will mean that wherever you go on earth, you will be considered a little crazy and "not from around here" because you have "gone off and got different;" but it also means that you are always welcome and at home in the family and kingdom of God. Amen.