

First Friends Church, A Quaker meeting
Rev. Dr. Loletta M. Barrett
June 6, 2021
A House Made Whole
Mark 3:20-35

Reading

And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered. “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Message

Jesus was not a traditional family man in any sense of the word. There is no Biblical evidence of him having a wife or children. The line of succession for his life work and ministry was not along family lines, but to twelve disciples who he sent to preach “the kingdom of God is at hand.”¹ In today’s reading his family comes to get him because people are saying he has gone out of his mind. His answer to their summons is a question, “Who is my family?”

In other references to family Jesus said he came to bring a sword that would sunder families, not “to bring peace on earth but to ... set a man against his father,

¹ Mt 10:6

a daughter against her mother... one's foes will be members of one's own household. In Matthew's Gospel Jesus goes on to say those who love their family more than him are not worthy of him. In Luke's Gospel Jesus ups the ante and says anyone who does not hate his own father, mother, children, and sibling... in fact anyone who does not renounce all that he has, cannot be his disciple.² We see this same challenge when a man says he will follow him and Jesus responds with a warning - he has no house or home.³ And again in the story of the rich young man who followed all the commandments but who turned sadly away when Jesus told him to sell all he owned and give it to the poor.⁴

A final reference to family is a response to a man who wants to bury his father before joining up with Jesus. Jesus responds, "Leave the dead to bury their own dead but as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God ... no one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."⁵

It is an understatement to say none of these are traditional family values. Instead they are all illustrations of Jesus' point- a house divided cannot stand. Jesus' call to follow him is difficult and unrelenting in its demand for a single focus on God and living in the kingdom of God. Renounce it all- house, home, possessions, mother, father, children, siblings, in order to be fit, to be worthy, to become part of Jesus' house- the kingdom of God.

² Mt 10:34, Lk 14:26-33

³ Mt 8:20, Lk 9:58

⁴ Mt 19:21, Mk 10:21, Lk 18:22

⁵ Lk 9:59, 62, Mt 8:21-22.

Before we can get to the point where we can follow unreservedly, we also have to work through the questions Jesus was asked and the questions he taught about. Who is my family? Where is my home? Maya Angelou wrote, “The ache for home lives inside all of us, the place where we can go as we are and not be questioned.”⁶ There was a long running TV show whose theme song expressed it. “Makin' your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Takin' a break from all your worries sure would help a lot... Be glad there's one place in the world where everybody knows your name and they're always glad you came. You want to go where people know, people are all the same. You want to go where everybody knows your name.”⁷ That is what the church, the meeting, this community, our meeting-house is for.

Although we might wish it wasn't true, most people were not lucky in experiencing places like this growing up or even in their lives today. They lived or live in homes that are critical and judgmental, houses divided by mental or physical illness, and in a society of personal, economic and social hardship. Last month was mental health awareness month. Research in trauma has begun to reveal more and more that not only is trauma carried in our minds and our memories but it can be carried in our bodies in debilitating chronic illness, pain, dis-ease and disability. It is transmitted generationally through dysfunctional parenting and family

⁶ Grounded, Diana Butler Bass, pg. 163.

⁷ Wikipedia, Where everybody knows your name

interaction patterns, and may also be transmitted in our genes. There are whole groups of people who have suffered not only family but societal neglect, abuse, violence and trauma. We see this as we begin to come to grips with the history of our country and the social injustice and inequities.

We have spent long years trying to throw off the shackles of the old adage “The sins of the fathers and mothers are transmitted to their children.” As a society we have tried to learn not to hold children accountable for what their parents did or shame whole families. But now we know that children are damaged by what their parents do and society allows, and even if the children do not exactly repeat or emulate, they often cannot let go of what was done to them by their families or by society generation after generation. That means that some of us remain victims of things like interpersonal violence, war, racism, homophobia, misogyny, and religious bigotry, and some of us remain perpetrators (and victims on a whole different level) inside our guilt. It is what our minds and bodies have been trained to do. Many of us live in houses divided between what we know or feel is right and what we cannot leave behind. We know Love and Truth is the way, yet anger, hate, duplicity, fear, resentment cling to us. A meeting-house is a place for healing hurts.

Among many groups who have been targeted by our society is the GLBTQIA + community. June is Pride month commemorating the Stonewall riots, uprising, or rebellion of June 1969; demonstrations in response to violent police

raids. They continued earlier civil resistance addressing civil rights violations ranging from discrimination in employment and housing to police harassment. “Pride” opposes shame and social stigma; it promotes the self-affirmation, dignity, and equality. It increases visibility of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as a part of our society.⁸ LGBTQA+ Pride includes everything that exists outside the dominant narrative, including people who are gender fluid or non-binary in their gender identity.⁹ So many of the people in this community come from houses divided; rejected and hated by their own families, church and society. Our meeting continues to do what we can to open the door to all people, to ensure our meeting-house is not divided into Loved and not-loved.

As I have navigated my own journey I have been grateful to find a unified house as well as chosen family. Chosen families are where people are loved and nurtured and empowered. They provide opportunity for healing for those who have not had the caring and compassion and support they should have. Most of us can remember a person or a group who stood up for or with us, perhaps when we were rebellious adolescents, facing a bully at school, making a difficult life decision, or when we lost our parents or families to death or absence for any reason, and needed support and love.

⁸ Wikipedia, Pride.

⁹ <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/what-does-lgbtqiaplus-stand-for/ar-BB15UUZb>

It was a difficult act of personal integrity that created the divided house in my family. But my wise and loving friend Donna taught me about a place where I could go as I was and not be questioned – chosen family. Later I was “adopted” by Mom Jean and Dad Harley who came to my graduations, ordination and installations, invited me to every family gathering, and treated me as a daughter. Then the old, white, pastor woman far from home was included by the children in Namibia in their fun, play and explorations. Arriving home alone and unemployed Linda and Gordon shared their home, food, and adventures. Finally I was chosen by my First Friends family. God is everywhere love is- an undivided house of chosen family is my true home.

Jesus faced and asked the question- who is my family? It was not a rhetorical question. A house divided cannot stand. A house united in Love and Truth is the only way forward. I know I and we still have much work to do in opening our hearts and our meeting to people who we have yet to invite, greet and fully welcome into God’s meeting- house. But I appreciate this teaching. “You are not required to finish your work, yet neither are you permitted to desist from it.” It is from The Ethics (or Sayings) of the Fathers, wisdom of Jewish Talmudic sages, in this case, Rabbi Tarfon, who taught 2,000 years ago (a contemporary of Jesus).

We have an obligation to continue trying and making our way through the world, in essence, making a difference. When things don’t seem to be progressing

it is okay to “be generous with our selves, stop, and pick up the work again later, when we’re refreshed and energized.” It is also “...permissible to come up short, so long as we have done the hard work...” But we need to remember that each step, each project, each small success along the way is important and will eventually result in progress, and it is okay to celebrate the small stuff!¹⁰

A house is made whole by Truth , Love, and family – biological and chosen, working together to do the will of God. Friends, the kingdom of God is at hand!

¹⁰ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20130226115815-11281694-best-advice-it-s-the-effort-not-the-outcome> Michael Fertik