

“The Difficult Sayings of Jesus: 3) Family Values”

a sermon by

Dr. William P. Wood

First Presbyterian Church
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Text: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and mother” (Mark 3:35)

During the Sundays of Lent, we have looked at some of the difficult sayings of Jesus: 1) the commandment for his disciples to deny them, take up a cross and follow him, and 2) The saying of Jesus that he came to bring not peace but a sword.

This morning we are examining another difficult saying about Jesus – the saying about Jesus and his family.

I.

Now let’s be clear. Families – in spite of our attempts to idealize them – can often be very difficult. Several weeks ago, I was trying to get in touch with my granddaughter Alexis, who is now sixteen years old. I had tried to call her cell phone, but had not received an answer. I was aware that most teenagers today use text messaging, so I was determined to send a text message. After all, I thought, how hard can that be? After some trial and error, I finally figured out how to do this, so I sent a couple of text messages. I was actually proud of myself. But a couple of them finally got jumbled a bit and I received a text message from Alexis that said “Granddaddy, are you all right?” I think she thought I had suffered a stroke.

There has always been a great deal of interest in the family of Jesus. The New Testament does not offer us a lot of insight into the relationship between Jesus and his family. The first 30 years of Jesus’ life are largely unknown. The one incident of Jesus’ childhood that is in the New Testament is the story in Luke’s gospel of the visit of Jesus and his parents to Jerusalem for the celebration of the Passover, when Jesus was twelve years old. (Luke 2: 41-52) His parents, who travelled from Nazareth with a group of other families, were on their way home when they realized that Jesus was not with them. They returned to Jerusalem to find Jesus in the Temple conversing with the Scribes and Pharisees. When they chided him for not staying with his family, he replied by saying that he was simply going about his father’s business.

We don't know much about Jesus' father, Joseph, except that he was a carpenter. His name does not appear during the ministry of Jesus which has led most scholars to assume that he probably died before Jesus began his ministry.

We do know that Jesus had sisters and brothers. In Matthew we are given the names of Jesus brothers: James, Joses, Simon, and Judas. (Matthew 13:55) Mark's gospel also makes reference to Jesus' mother, Mary, to his brothers James, Joses, and Judas, and Simon as well as Jesus' sisters, who are not named. (Mark 6:3)

There is certainly no evidence in the New Testament that Jesus was not a loyal son. As a boy, he would have been familiar with the commandment to "honor your mother and father" and there is every reason to believe that Jesus did that. Like his father, Jesus was a carpenter by trade.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, was apparently a part of the women that followed Jesus throughout his ministry. Mary was one of the women present at the crucifixion of Jesus. In John's Gospel (John 19) Jesus, while hanging on the cross, entrusted the care of his mother to John, the beloved disciple. There is a tradition within the church that the disciple John took Jesus' mother with him to Ephesus, where she lived until her death.

According to the Book of Acts (Acts 1:14), Mary was a vital part of the early church. The same is true of Jesus' brother James, who became the leader of the church in Jerusalem, and to whom tradition ascribes the Epistle of James in the New Testament.

II.

So the question is raised, if Jesus was a loyal son of Joseph and Mary, as well as a faithful brother to his brothers and sisters, then what do we make of this passage in Mark, in which Jesus' appears to repudiate his mother and his siblings?

The answer to that question is given by Mark's gospel in verse nineteen of chapter three. In Mark's setting, Jesus returns to his hometown of Galilee, where he enters into a home, probably the home of his disciples James and John. At this point in the narrative, two groups come to Jesus to question him. One of these groups was the religious leaders of Jesus' day, the Scribes and Pharisees. The other group was his family – his mother and his brothers and sisters.

Both of these groups should have known who Jesus was. Both thought he was insane. The Scribes and Pharisees accused him of having a demon. They were there to destroy him. His family probably came out of concern for Jesus. They had heard all these stories about Jesus, and like a lot of families, they did not know what to do about Jesus. So they sent word and asked him to join them, which Jesus refused to do.

This misunderstanding by Jesus' family is what prompts the saying that forms our text this morning. When Jesus is told that his mother, brother, and sisters were waiting outside for him and asking for him, he replied by saying, "Who are my mother and my brothers and sisters?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers and sisters. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3: 33-34)

Jesus always recognized that there was a higher loyalty than even the loyalty to one's family. It is loyalty to God. That sense of loyalty is present in that brief narrative of Jesus in the temple as a boy, where he responded to his parents that he "had to be about his father's business." It is present in this story as well, when Jesus acknowledges that the person who does the will of God is his real brother and sister.

On Thursday night I had the opportunity to listen to Tom Friedman speak at Queens University on his recent book, *Hot, Flat, and Crowded*, in which Friedman discussed some of the environment concerns that he has for our country and our world, including global warming (which he calls "global weirding"), the problem of the petro-dictators, as well as the dire consequences of what will happen to our planet if we do not address the terrible problem of carbon dioxide emissions and host of other environmental concerns. The one word that Friedman said that could not be used in connection to the problems and opportunities that face us is the word "easy." Whatever lies before us, the way from insanity to sanity in terms of energy policies will not be easy.

I believe the same holds true in following Jesus. There is only one word that Mark holds before us. The road to the cross – the road to Easter – is not easy.

But it is a road that leads us to light of Easter, and that is a light that no darkness can overcome.

Amen.