

Matthew 12:46-50

⁴⁶ While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. ⁴⁷ Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you."

⁴⁸ He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" ⁴⁹ Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. ⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

A Better Bond

Trinity CRC, July 4, 2021 AM

Matthew 12:46-50

Rev. Richard J. deLange

Friends of Christ,

I suspect most of us have seen commercials for denture cream that provides the best bond to the gums so that your dentures function like regular teeth. If my memory serves me right, years ago Poligrip proudly declared, "Use Poligrip and have yourself an apple".

Maybe you heard about Tessica Brown who earlier this year ran out of hair gel and figured maybe Gorilla Glue would be a good substitute for once? Since she was in the middle of doing her hair, she rather innocently and naively didn't think too much about it. She put it in her hair and it was soon stuck to her scalp and hard as a rock.

Gorilla Glue claims to be the best bond for many things but hair is not on their list!

We also use the word bond to refer to human relationships. There is the bond of friendship. You often hear young people today talking about BFFs. Best Friends Forever. That's very special and wonderful. We all need the bond of deep friendship with a few people in our lives. We can't be best friends with everyone but we all need one or two special people we really connect with. We need bonds of love with others.

We still hear talk in our society of marriage being one of strongest bonds between people. And that's certainly echoed in the Bible in some ways. Likewise the bonds of family are important and good. Many people spend special holidays like Canada Day with family. You might spend your Sunday afternoons with your family and enjoy all the love and laughter of those family bonds. That's good.

Certainly we don't want to take anything away from those good relationships. God has designed friendships, marriage and family to be wonderful institutions for us. Family was a big deal in Jesus' day too.

So our Bible reading this morning is rather shocking. When someone tells Jesus that his family is outside. He doesn't seem to care. What should we make of this?

All Are Welcome

First of all, rather than looking at what Jesus is not doing by his words and actions in this account, look at what he is saying. I think we can dismiss any suggestion that Jesus is being rude and disrespectful to his blood relatives. He's not ignoring his family. Even as he hung on the cross, Jesus showed compassion for his mother and for her longterm care, so he is not trying to push his biological family away.

He is making another point. Jesus wants it to be clear to people that all are welcome in the family of God and they come in by following him. Look around the room he is in, here at the end of Matthew 12. He's surrounded by his rag tag group of disciples from every class of society. Presumably, it's not just the 12; there are probably some women followers as well; perhaps even some people he recently healed. Jesus shows himself to be something completely different from what the people have seen from their religious leaders who keep their distance from anyone and anything that does not meet their made-up cleanliness or holiness standards.

Let's look back one chapter in this gospel. For the last 4 Sundays, we've heard the Call to Worship from the end of Matthew 11. Jesus gives a wonderful invitation to all people:

Mt 11:28 "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."

He's inviting people—anyone who is listening—to live under the merits of his saving work and generous love. He wants everyone to leave behind the weight of sin, the heaviness of life's burdens and find the new life of resting in his grace.

To that end, as chapter 12 begins, Jesus defends his disciples from the legalism and burdensome weight that the Pharisees try to lay on them for picking some grain on the Sabbath day. He exclaims to those religious heavyweights and chastises them at the same time, saying,

Mt 12:6 I tell you that one greater than the temple is here. ⁷ If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.

With those words, Jesus lifts up his disciples, calling them innocent. They are not guilty of breaking the Sabbath simply because they picked and ate some grain. Jesus tears off that weight of legalistic guilt.

That same Sabbath day, Jesus heals a man with a shriveled hand, showing that life in the kingdom of God is not supposed to be about keeping rules but loving God and our neighbour, regardless of the day of the week. This man was freed by Jesus from his physical and economic burden as well as the burden of shame that people like him lived under in that culture. But rather than rejoice in the healing of this man, those burden-loving Pharisees look for a way to kill Jesus whom they perceive to be a threat to their way of life and their holiness code.

Matthew then tells us in v.15 that Jesus withdrew from that place. But people followed him, especially the sick and those who loved them. And Jesus healed them all. Matthew writes in the middle of the chapter that all of these miracles of Jesus were the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy about the Messiah who will be full of the Holy Spirit, seeking justice for all the oppressed.

*Mt 12:20 A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out,
till he leads justice to victory.*

Then Matthew continues telling us about more healings. A blind and mute man is healed. He can talk and see perhaps for the first time in his life. Again, the shame of his disabilities is lifted. No more can people speculate, as they did so often in that culture, about what sin this man or his parents committed that must have led God to make him mute and blind. According to that mindset, someone had to be guilty of something in order for this man to be doubly cursed. But Jesus liberates this man from this heavy weight of guilt and shame.

All of these miracles show how Jesus brings liberation to people, frees them not only from their sin but also from the burdens of this life. In short, Jesus introduces the people to the kingdom of God where *burden-free* living comes from believing in and following him. And it's free for anyone and everyone, just as he freely healed all kinds of sick people.

More than physical healing, Jesus wants and invites all kinds of people to follow him. That's the first reason he leaves his family outside at the door. He's once again teaching by example that the kingdom of God is open to all sorts of people. In fact, that quote from Isaiah includes these words in Matthew 12:21

*Mt 12:21 "... In his name **the nations** will put their hope."*

Deeper Connection

Secondly, Jesus is teaching us that the kingdom of God has a deeper connection than blood. Again, Jesus isn't rejecting his mother and brothers outside. Rather, he's teaching that God's kingdom has a higher level of connection than biology can offer. Being connected to one another by the blood of Christ is greater than being genetically or legally bound. Jesus is teaching us who his true family is.

Friends, the pandemic has been hard on being a family of faith. It's probably done one of two things for you. Either it's made you long more for your church family or it's made you think less of it. By nature, some of us are more into other people and some are more private. That's okay.

Nonetheless, we make a big mistake when we think we can live to the fullest as a Christian without being closely connected to other Christians. You know that Francis of Assisi song, "We are pilgrims on a journey..."? It starts with "we". I'm not on this journey of following Jesus all by myself. Neither are you. We are fellow pilgrims on the journey. The song continues, "We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load."

As a pastor, I've hated this pandemic. I realized through the past year just how much I need the body of believers. Yes, I serve the church. Yes, I'm paid to be a pastor. But this pandemic has helped remind me again that I'm better with others than I am alone. In many ways, the pandemic has cut us off from one another. We worked around it as much as we could but it forced us to function as Christians in little islands, apart from the church family. We did what we had to do for the good of our society but that's not the way Jesus designed us as Christians to be at our best.

We need to be in fellowship with other believers. Worshiping together is only one part of it. It's an important part. But just "coming to church" and then leaving without really connecting isn't tapping into the depths of our connection through Christ. Our unity through Christ is more important and more eternal than any other relationship we have in this life.

A lot of people think that marriage and family is the best thing in this world. I don't deny that marriage is great and that family is wonderful. But some people make family an idol. So it's good to remember that Jesus also hints at marriage piling by comparison to the unity we will experience amongst believers in the life to come. When asked about a woman who had several husbands and whose wife she would be in the next life, Jesus responded,

Mt 22:30 At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

For those of us who have a wonderful marriage in this life, Jesus is saying that even such a great human relationship will dim compared to the relationship we enjoy as fellow disciples of Jesus. And if that is life in the kingdom to come, then it's a pattern for life in the kingdom now.

Years ago we had a couple who told me that they were putting God on the shelf. They dropped out of Sunday worship, wouldn't answer or return phone calls. They gave up on Jesus and their church family just when they needed the church most. A year or so later, their whole life was in shambles and they admitted it. They realized the bond we shared in Christ made a difference—a huge difference—in their lives.

I suspect we all can do better in plumbing the depths of our unity in Christ. Just think about Jesus' high priestly prayer for us. He says, "Father, I pray that they—referring to you and me—may be one as we are one." He's letting us know that we can be united and close in a way that resembles the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This is unity that Jesus provides to us as a gift but also as a responsibility and goal. It's something we can enjoy freely but also something we can work at and improve. It's not something to take for granted but something to be cherished and developed through worship, fellowship, study and prayer as well as intentional discipleship which includes accountability and mutual help in our spiritual walk.

The depths of our unity in Christ is greater than marriage or family alone. That's another reason Jesus leaves his mother and brothers outside. He wants us to see that a relationship with others **that is built** around him is better.

Continue to Widen the Tent

Thirdly, then, the implication of Jesus' teaching is that we are called to widen the tent. You and I might be comfortable with our family. That is good. We should be. But being part of the family of God means we need to have a bigger vision. We need bigger eyes. We need a bigger heart.

And we have those resources through Jesus who equips us with the Holy Spirit. When Jesus supposedly rejected his mother and family at the door, he was not trashing them as unimportant. No, he was making the point that the family of God is much wider than our relatives.

Someone recently asked me if having a certain last name in the church makes you more important. I bristled with pain at the thought that some people might even get that impression. The impression might not always be unwarranted but I do think it is always and completely unacceptable.

The radical nature of the gospel and the centrality of Jesus for all of us means that no one is more important than anyone else in the church. We are all sister and brothers in Christ. He is our big brother and we are siblings—adopted children of God—by God's amazing grace. That's true regardless of last name, regardless of social status, regardless of bank account, skin colour, gender, age or anything else.

So Jesus is reminding us to widen the tent. Welcome each and every person into the family of God. Anyone who confesses their sins and their need for Jesus is welcome and equal to everyone else.

Start with repentance for the barriers we've put up. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were trying to keep people out of the kingdom **who** were considered unclean or unworthy. They had rules or practices that kept people at a distance. We must not do that. Even if we don't do anything like that formally, do we in-practice keep people away by how we judge them as being unsuitable? Maybe because—God-forbid—they have the wrong last name. Maybe because they don't make enough money. Maybe because they look different than us or have a different opinion on a theological issue or something like a Sabbath practice. Maybe because they are too young... or too old. Because they are married or single, have children or don't have children. We must repent of any barrier we put up that keeps people out of the wonderful family of God here at Trinity or anywhere else.

Along with repentance comes change. It is wonderful to be part of a diverse church family with a growing tent. The picture of the church in the book of Revelation is instructive for us. John writes in Revelation 7:9,

Rev 7:9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands..."

This is a vision for us to embrace and strive for here on earth as it is in heaven because diversity is beautiful.

One of the things I've pondered several times over the past weeks is just how amazing creation is. God could have made our bodies to function by drinking a couple of bottles of something like *Ensure* every day. He could have given us one kind of fruit and one vegetable. Or something like manna. But instead, he gave us hundred if not thousands of different kinds of foods. Then there are all kinds of spices to add in and all sorts of different ways to prepare a meal. We have so many wonderful, tasty options for us that make food not just nourishing but enjoyable.

Take that sort of wonderful diversity and imagine what it's like when we as the family of God enjoy such beautiful variety. Diversity has challenges but also blessings which God calls us to seek. And if we look around ourselves in Canada, we can't help but notice that our country is very diverse. I look at the neighbours on my street. When we have a neighbourhood street party, we have every skin colour. White is a minority. Every household has a different ethnic background with different traditions and foods that enrich their lives. It's so wonderful to mix with that group. It enriches me.

When it comes to God's diverse family, we are all united in Christ. He saves all kinds of people. He uses all kinds of people in the service of his kingdom. As Paul said, in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. He was not dismissing differences but he was saying how Christ break down barriers that divide us and welcomes all sorts of people into his family because a diverse body of believers is beautiful. It might be like the difference between an old black and white photo or a high definition colour picture projected on to our large screen TV.

The picture of Christ's Church is all kinds of people doing his Father's will. The disciples in that house whom Jesus declares to be his family are people who are following him and seeking to do God's will as they listen to Jesus' kingdom-teaching. They are learning to live as Jesus did, loving neighbours, seeking justice for all. They are his true family. Seeking to honour God as the response to being welcomed freely into the family. Doing the Father's will identifies or marks us as members of the family of God. Jesus brings us into the family of God so we can live and serve in the certainty of salvation. We can enjoy our freedom from the bondage of law, guilt, sin and shame. And we can keep learning from one another and helping each other to become all that Jesus has redeemed us to be.

Amen.