

A Broken Home

By
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Most families have that one member who's just a little "different," don't they.

That one aunt or uncle who doesn't quite fit into the family norm,

or whose lifestyle is contrary to what society considers "acceptable."

Often they are the free spirit in the group, or the "black sheep" of the family.

They are the ones everybody rolls their eyes about when they are referenced,

Or the ones they are forced to tolerate at family gatherings.

Yet for the children and youth of the family,

they're often the cool aunts or uncles, the ones that make family time fun,

probably because they make the adults so uncomfortable.

But what is it about crazy Uncle Eddie or Aunt Nancy

that makes the family so uncomfortable? Why do they feel ashamed of them?

I think we can all identify with that illustration,

unless of course you ARE that "different" family member.

Whether we like it or not, we all worry to some extent about what others will think of us,

whether as individuals, or members of a group such as one's family.

We don't want to stick out in a negative way.

To do so implies that we won't be included in the "in" crowd.

After all, nobody likes to be excluded.

But is the "in" crowd always the best place to be?

Certainly it makes everyday life easier when you're on the same page

with most of your family, or your neighborhood or town.

You know what the expectations of thought and behavior are,

and you accommodate them to fit in, to show unity with those around you.

When everybody has the same expectations and standard of behavior,

there's a lot less discord and conflict.

It's how we as human beings have evolved socially

to ensure the stability of the communities we form.

And there are positive aspects to "fitting in."

Some standards are based on the "golden rule,"

doing unto others as you would have done unto you,

establishing mutual respect for each other.

Others such as honoring the elderly and one's parents

ensure the most vulnerable are cared for.

But it's not just social rules that define what's "normal and acceptable."

Within our churches we have our own sets of norms and traditions.

What we consider appropriate in dress, behavior,

even how we think is often identified in terms of what is "normal" or "acceptable."

So what do we do with those who stick out from the crowd?

The "crazy relatives" who want to be a part of our faith family.

Do we roll our eyes?

Or perhaps even something more assertive,

like the infamous "cold shoulder"

or even resorting to active exclusion or persecution?

What if the crazy uncle among us is Jesus?

In our gospel story today, that's the scenario we enter into with him.

He's been on the road for a little while preaching, healing, and exorcising with an "o"

and now he's back on the home turf in Galilee,

seeking a little table fellowship with the home team.

But a nice relaxing evening with friends is not on his agenda, unfortunately.

The greater denomination has sent representatives
to investigate and determine if what he is doing
fit's in with church norms and rules.

For us in the Pacific Northwest district of the Church of the Brethren,
that's a familiar sounding scenario.

And what is it that Jesus is doing, or what about his behavior is causing such a stir?

Well, for starters, he's going around healing people and casting out demons.

There were certainly plenty of healers going around in those days,
but he's doing it in a way that doesn't fit in with the rules.

He's doing it on the Sabbath and taking credit
as the conduit of God's Spirit in doing so.

That's just not how it's done. That's not our tradition.

And as far as casting out demons is concerned,
a big part of religious leadership
doesn't even acknowledge the existence of demons,
yet these possibly fictional entities
seem to be on speaking terms with Jesus,
and acknowledge him as God incarnate.

For the scribes who have journeyed from Jerusalem,
this man is an embarrassment to the faith.

He doesn't play according to the rules. He just doesn't fit in.

Some in the crowd think he's just plain crazy.

That opinion has gained such traction that word of it has reached his family

up the road in Nazareth.

Mary's crazy kid is at it again.

I can almost picture her and his human siblings on the road to Capernaum,

not meeting the gaze of others,

hoping not to run into anyone they may know,

just hoping they can get there and round him up

to take back to the safety of home and out of the public eye.

Oh the shame upon shame for poor Mary.

I'm sure there's been whispers and talk about Jesus since day one,

being conceived a little early

in light of the timing of her marriage to Joseph.

Now I'm sure the whispers are along the lines of,

“well, you reap what you sew.”

Thank goodness none of us would ever think like that.

Now these church leaders are even saying he's doing the work of the devil.

Of course, Jesus debunks that pretty handily from a logical point of view.

It doesn't make sense for the devil to be casting out his own demons.

Kind of defeats the purpose of possession in the first place.

But as we know well in today's world, it doesn't matter if a rumor is true.

The damage is done regardless.

In hindsight, it can be easy for us to look at this story

and be critical of the crowd and the church authorities, even of Christ's human family.

But is it so far off the mark from us?

What norms do we cling to,

and who do we whisper about that don't fit in with those norms.

After all, whether we are preaching up front or serving on a committee,
organizing potlucks or setting up worship,

we are all a part of “church authority.”

Traditionally Christianity places Christ at the base of all of those structures,
and in doing so,

uses the authority derived from “doing the work of the body”
to bolster their own authority.

In those arenas, there is always a “right way” and a “wrong way” of doing things,
and all too often, those who are “in” and those who are “out.”

Yet, what can be problematic to think about in these scenarios

is that these structures are not inherently bad or evil things.

All of these these organizations, the Temple authorities in Jesus' day,
the contemporary church, and the family,

are trying to maintain domestic and religious life
in the midst of a troubled world.

Yet from Jesus' perspective, these familiar and seemingly benign institutions
are beyond the pale of his ministry.

What is odd and unique about Jesus' ministry is that he is open to everybody:

Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick,
working class people, women, sexual outcasts, even tax collectors!

The only people who provoke Jesus' intolerance are his family
and the normal, law-abiding scribes and Pharisees.

The ones closest to him, his family,

and those who are most like him, the religious authorities,

those dedicated to a life of piety, are those that are farthest from him.

They are the least able to make the leap

from their dedication to social and religious norms

to openhearted love of God's beloved, disfigured humanity.

For these people, Jesus' disordered love of humanity

feels like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolized by the demonic, or insanity.

It's just so far from "normal."

Jesus' work is synonymous with that of the Holy Spirit,

and he makes the point that to criticize that "unusual" work,

is to blaspheme the Holy Spirit, God incarnate among us.

If we were to transpose this viewpoint into our own time, instead of lepers and demoniacs,

who might we see crowding around Jesus?

Would it be the disabled or legless Afghan or Palestinian children?

Or maybe a group of people reeking of coffee and cigarettes at an AA meeting?

A lesbian mother with a baby on her hip?

When we think about who is near Jesus, it is not the morally perfect.

It is just the diverse mess that humanity is made up of,

with all of its moral, physical, spiritual beauty AND all of its imperfections.

The only ones not in the picture, not pressing in at the doors and windows,

desperate and aching to see Jesus,

are the ones who think they know

what religious and family life is "supposed" to look like,

what is universally "normal."

Jesus is making the point that we cannot set criteria and rules for the workings of the Spirit.

We can't define who is "in" and who is "out,"

because the Spirit will break those rules or criteria the moment we do.

This passage also points out the difficulty of defining what the work of the Holy Spirit is.

We all know the struggle of trying to discern the leadings of the Spirit.

But perhaps we can gain a nugget of wisdom from this scripture.

We can build on the theme of healing

that runs throughout this section of Mark's gospel.

That is one constant criteria which we can be certain is of the Spirit.

If we look at our criteria, does it have healing as its nature and focus?

It was the desire for healing that drew people to Jesus.

If we have compassion for our own wounds, and the wounds of others,

we might find ourselves in the crowd devoted to Jesus,

instead of in the "legitimate" family that Jesus rejects.

We might find that we no longer need to define what is "normal"

and actively seek the Spirit at work

in whatever form or behavior we encounter.

Maybe a membership card with the "in" crowd

won't have the same relevance.

That attitude of not needing to be officially "in"

is a promising sign from the younger generations that are coming up.

In a 2011, a story in the journal *Christian Century*,

described the new perspective of millennials

with regards to church membership.

The article discussed the increasing tendency of people

to attend church without becoming formal members.

Apparently many in the millennial generation

cannot see the point of having their names on membership roles.

Millennials are hypersensitive to hypocrisy.

They want any association that they join to be “authentic”

and they prefer “loose connections”

that do not tie them down to a particular creed or set of criteria.

In other words, they don't want to subscribe to a forced sense of what is “normal.”

What about us?

Is what we cling to as “normal” something of the Spirit or our own making?

Are there those in our own families, biological or spiritual that we roll our eyes at?

Jesus makes clear the only criteria we are to use is that of the Spirit.

I hope and pray as we leave here today, as individuals, as members of leadership,
and as a community of faith,

we seek to be the home of the broken,

a place for those pressing at the doors and windows to be with Jesus,

not the home that is full of “normal” people

suspicious of the very Spirit we are to seek always. May it be so, Amen.

Consecration of Church Leadership (bulletin)

Hymn Will you let me be your servant 307

Benediction

May God's Spirit go with you, guide you, and lead you.

May Christ's example be the only criteria in all you say and do.

And may we all seek to be the disciples of healing we are called to be. Amen.