

## SERMON:

There is a story of the Jewish woman who schleps to the Himalayas in search of a famous guru. She travels by plane, train and rickshaw to reach a Buddhist monastery in Nepal. When she gets there she's sweating, exhausted from traveling but she is committed, and thankfully, wearing sensible shoes. An old lama in a maroon and saffron robe opens the door, and the woman promptly requests a meeting with the guru. The lama explains that this is impossible because the guru is in silent retreat, meditating in a cave high on a mountaintop. Not willing to take no for an answer, she insists that she absolutely must see this guru. Finally the lama acquiesces while insisting on the following rules: The meeting must be brief, she must bow when addressing the guru, and she can say no more than eight words to him. The woman agrees and says a silent prayer that her years with a personal trainer will pay off and somehow get her up the mountain. After hiring a Sherpa and a yak, she sets off for the grueling trek. With hardly an ounce of energy left, her spiritual search brings her to the opening of the cave high on the mountain. Keeping within the eight word limit in addressing the guru she breathes in deeply, sticks her head in the opening of the cave, bows and says, "Sheldon, it's your mother. Enough already, come home!"

Harvard scholar Harvey Cox, in his book *How to Read the Bible*, says that the two great questions about any bible passage are: what did it mean then? and What does it mean now? Acknowledging that these questions really can't be separated. I've been thinking about these questions as I've sat with this text.

What did it mean then? What does it mean now?

Mr. Cox also says that we all go to the bible looking for something. What we're looking for is shaped by who we are, our age, class, racial and gender composition, our temperament, the era in which we live. We bring ourselves to the text. We cannot avoid that. There is no total objectivity in our study of the Word. What we can do is consciously be aware of where we are coming from and what we hope to find as we read the bible, and hope others will be candid about how they come as well.<sup>1</sup>

And so, I admit, as a mom, my first response is to look at this from the mother's perspective. Mary is one anxious mom in this passage. She wants her son to give up this crazy calling and come home and behave like the good Jewish son she's raised him to be! In this story She was just trying to protect her son, and maybe her reputation, and that of her family, too.

Our scripture is from early in Jesus ministry - I'm grateful that the story doesn't end here. We know the end of the story, how it was Mary who stood at the foot of the cross. Somehow, somewhere, along the way, Mary, mom, becomes one of Jesus closest followers. She's there, supporting him, even unto death. Maybe it's these stories of those closest to Jesus missing the point that keep me coming back to the gospels for more.

If you were able to read the first few chapters of Mark this past week you might have gotten the sense of the intensity of Jesus ministry, right from the beginning. Reading The gospel of Mark is almost like reading a condensed Readers Digest book. We move from action to action to action. Jesus was surrounded by crowds.

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<sup>1</sup> Cox, Harvey. 2015. *How to Read the Bible*. Harper One Publishing.

Surrounded by people desperate for healing, desperate simply to be near him. Today's story begins earlier in the chapter with "Then he went home and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat." Jesus goes home... home can be a complex place, can't it? It can be a place of rest, a sanctuary for some, and it can be a messy place with relationships that test and stretch us, that ask us to be something we've grown out of.

Mark's gospel was written somewhere between 65-73 AD, at a time of severe persecution of the early Christians. His audience may well have been those who weren't his most ardent early followers, as those first faith filled believers were killed by the Roman authorities. The hearers of the early gospel may have been the ones that weren't sure if they were on the inside or the outside, those who lived in fear and uncertainty of their relationship with Jesus, desperate to be near him and learn from him, but unsure of who he really is. These earlier readers of this good news may have needed to be reassured that Jesus was welcoming them too.

So in this story we find Jesus at home, a place so crowded that he couldn't even eat, and there were rumors flying about him by this point. "He has gone out of his mind" some were saying. That was it. When his family heard that, they went out to restrain him. Enough is enough, right? Someone's got to get this guy in line! Then the story shifts and the scribes, who came all the way down from Jerusalem, close to a 100-mile journey, accuse him of having Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons, in him. Here's another super anxious group. They traveled all this way – several days journey – to pick a fight and try and get the crowd and this rabble rouser in line. The Jews at this time had a precarious relationship with the ruling authorities, they knew the repercussions of persecution. And yet Jesus is unperturbed. He, the one who spoke with authority, argues with the scribes, and

then the scene shifts again, back to Jesus, inside the house, a crowd around him, and his family outside, calling to him.

His family who we're told want to restrain him are outside, asking for him. This verb - to restrain, also translated as 'to take hold of, or seize' is used repeatedly later in Mark's gospel in the garden of Gethsemane, when they came to capture Jesus.

When Mary and her other kids, or when we, for that matter, feel the need to seize, to restrict, we tend to constrict, and become small – losing perspective. We want to control. That becomes our focus; we suddenly stop Loving God with all our hearts and our neighbors as ourselves. When we restrict, The expansive call of Christ to love the least of these goes out the window. We lose the ability to be creative and open to new ideas and ways of being. We focus on getting control, having our will be done, not the will of God, that Jesus suggests as the defining characteristic of his true family.

Here in this story, Jesus shows us another way. Instead of reacting to the anxiety around him, Jesus reimagines.

Reimagining is the work of Jesus. His call to us, again and again, is to be willing to see his work, and our work, in new, life-altering ways. Insiders, family, become outsiders, and outsiders, the crowd, become insiders. When we minister to whomever is outside – anyone marginalized in our community - we are joining in the Kingdom work of reimagining this world into something new, something different.

Jesus has no intention of being restrained in his work of the kingdom. And so, he turns to those around him, this crowd, who will turn on him, betray him, turn him over to be killed. This crowd who is fickle and don't really understand him either - He turns to these people and says "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

What incredible love and compassion! Jesus, knowing that this crowd that follows him, and doesn't have a clue what he's really about - He still turns to them and says you, you who will betray me and disown me – you are my mother, my brothers, my sisters! I call you my own. He was inviting the needy, the interested and curious, those who didn't really know what he was all about, to be his chosen family.

You all, you here, are my mother and my brothers!

Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

This, perhaps, is one of the most radical statements in the Gospel. It announces a whole new way of being family and the abandonment of blood-relations as the primary bond that defines and orders one's life. In first century Palestine this is an affront to the concept of family, where an individual's worth and identity were tied to family status.<sup>2</sup> And Jesus doesn't mention 'father'. For a society rooted in patriarchy, this radical response of Jesus is another reconfiguring, reimagining. In a time and culture where obedience and allegiance to family was of utmost importance, Jesus says no – reimagine with me – family is something much deeper than blood relations. 'Whoever does the will of God' is my brother and sister and mother – this is Jesus radically new definition of family, it's his call to a new, beloved community. Doing the will of God becomes another sign of spiritual

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<sup>2</sup> Ewart, David. *Holy Textures*. Online blog.

kinship. Throughout the gospels Jesus continually extends the boundaries of his spiritual family to a variety of public sinners, persons who are left behind physically, mentally, spiritually and economically in one way or another.<sup>3</sup>

That's some of what it meant then, and it's also what it means for us to day. The good news is that Jesus reimagines us as his blood family. Jesus offers us a way to be his family. Do the will of God and you are my mother, brother, sister. It's later in this gospel that he more clearly defines just what it means to do the will of God – love the Lord your God with all your being, and love your neighbor as yourself. Both straightforward and extremely challenging. Do this, and you're related to me.

We may betray Jesus in our words and actions, we may betray and hurt one another, and yet Jesus doesn't give up on us, and reminds us not to give up on each other. Jesus invites us to join him in reimagining what family means. That's the work of living out the will of God in our daily lives. We are called to reconciliation, to relating and loving this broken body as our mother and brothers and sisters.

I want you to hear a story that I listened to this week on Story corps entitled "Why do care so much for a stranger" It's a short conversation between Horace Atwater Jr. and Adrian Hawkins, who he took in as a foster child when Adrian was about 14 years old. For me, it's what it means when Jesus says: Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.

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<sup>3</sup> Leonard, Bill. 2014. *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*. Westminster John Knox Press.

<https://storycorps.org/liste.n/adrian-hawkins-and-horace-atggwater-jr/><sup>4</sup>

There are several parts of that story I find really thought provoking, but one is how the Dad chose to reimagine what it means to love another. He recognized his sin and chose to live and act differently. He chose to be expansive, be transformed through his mistakes and suffering, and to do the will of God. His is the Transforming work of reimagining family.

I encourage you to take some time, we will have a few moments together, to consider while we listen to Mikes music -

Are there places of anxiety in your life, where you are restraining the possibilities of reimagining what it means to love and serve? How might you respond to Jesus radical invitation to be his mother, his brother, his sister? To belong to him by living out the will of God in your life?

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<sup>4</sup> StoryCorp June 13 2014. Why do you care so much for a stranger?