**New hope sermon - “A new (upended) view of family – Mark 3**

We’ve talked about how Jesus’s confrontations with the Pharisees must have made it hard for his new followers. But certainly even closer to home was his upending of the traditional view of family. Here in Mark 3, early in the ministry, we hear Jesus making 2 very non-traditional statements about family. They are our challenging texts today.

Naturally, with families having such a significant part of societal life, there are many funny stories and cartoons about how families work. Communication has always been an issue. **“**I loved this one:

A subtle signal? I wonder what it would look like here at New Hope!

So what descriptions come to your mind when you think of “family”?

**“**I asked Marti how she would describe family and she said, “Family should be a safe place. All the bad stuff in our past (related to her abusive husband and broken family through divorce) is eclipsed. Now as I think of my current family situation I think of my kids and me as family. We have very much established good family relationships. We can just be totally ourselves; we don’t have to second guess what another person is saying or intending. It is effortless and restorative. When I’m with my kids is when I really have the most fun. I’m grateful to the Lord for this.”

In my background you’ve heard me talk of my grandmother as Bombshell Bama because she was so disruptive and unloving – even to my own mother. As a result, Mommy didn’t know how to give love because she had never received it – only barbed critical comments all her life. Then when I became a Christian both parents rejected my faith. They basically wanted nothing to do with God or any form of religion. That’s when I discovered the verse: “*Though my mother and father forsake me, the Lord will receive me*.” Ps. 27:10. This sustained me in those early collegiate years as a new believer. The ideal model of a harmonious, happy, healthy family is far from the norm around the world. Many of us have had painful relationships within our blood family. It is God who has done the restoration for us.

Yet admitting those experiences of brokenness runs counter to how cultures say families should work. In the first century Mediterranean world, an individual’s identity was intrinsically tied to one’s blood family. In fact, in the Old Testament, “life” is used almost interchangeably with “family.” One’s family was one’s life and to reject family or to be cut out of the family was to lose one’s life (See Luke 14:26)” “Blood Family was at the heart of one’s identity and allegiance.”(D. Garland, NIV Application Commentary Mark, p. 131.).

But Jesus upends his and most culture’s traditional and idealistic expectations of family in our two passages in Mark. Turn with me to Mark 3. The first incident is in 3:20-22. The second is in 3:31-35. I wonder how many of us have parents or other family members who could echo these words about us from the first incident or be incensed by Jesus’ words in the second incident.

Incident #1 – Mk. 3:20-21. **“***He is out of his mind*.” The context for that comment is that w*hen Jesus and the disciples entered a house, such a large a crowd gathered that the disciples and Jesus were not even able to eat.* There’s the press of ministry gone overboard, to be sure. And that can be a problem for all professional ministers or anyone who is really committed to serve others whether in a homeless shelter, or an orphanage or as a pastor or youth leader. The demands and needs of others can throw our whole schedule out of whack and burn us out quickly. We understand that. But look at v. 23”*When his family heard about this, they went to take charge of him*.” Wow – that’s quite a line because by now Jesus is in his thirties. **“**And the family felt they needed to put a stop to his ministry and take charge of him. The word for “take charge” means “to seize forcibly” (NIV Application Commentary Mark, D. Garland, p. 130). Perhaps they felt the mounting opposition would damage Jesus and their own reputation. Perhaps they were on the side of the Pharisees and critical of Jesus’ disregard for the law. Perhaps they were seeking His safety and trying to protect Him. But whatever it was, they were not supportive of His ministry and wanted to bring it to a halt. I know there are multitudes of families, particularly in the majority world where collectivistic identity and family loyalty are top values, who have tried to do this – *they went to take charge of him.* Ever had that happen?

Jesus’s reaction is seen in the second incident – Mark 3:31-35: **“***Then Jesus’ mother and brothers arrived. Standing outside, they sent someone in to call him. 32A crowd was sitting around him, and they told him, “Your mother and brothers are outside looking for you.”33He asked, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.*” Eugene Peterson in The Message translated v. 35 as: *“Who do you think are my mother and brothers?” Looking around, taking in everyone seated around him, he said, “Right here, right in front of you—my mother and my brothers. Obedience is thicker than blood. The person who obeys God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”* Wow. I wonder how that went down with his biological family.

**“**This Christmas holiday several of you will be with your blood family. What is their role in your life? If they are not believers, how are you to relate to them even when they make demands you cannot fulfill as a believer? Max Lucado quipped: If your family doesn't appreciate you, take heart. Jesus faced the same thing in his family.*Max Lucado, Christian Reader, Vol. 32, no. 3.*  We are called to honor and respect our blood parents.

But, Jesus’ understanding of family dynamics broadens the definition of family and that may be the group of people with whom many of us will celebrate the holidays. I like this definition of what means practically? Within that broader definition “Jesus’ family, the Body of Christ, is to be a circle of strength, founded in faith, joined in love and kept by God.” It’s multicultural; it’s people who bond to one another by choice – people of faith you sacrifice for and love with Christ’s love. “Family isn’t always blood. It’s the people in your life who want you in theirs, the ones who accept you for who you are. The ones who would do anything to see you smile and who love you no matter what.” They weep when you weep. They reach out when you feel abandoned or lost.

Two examples come to mind. Any Crouch tells this story of his role as a friend alongside blood family members of a Christian husband, and father and son who was dying of cancer:

“A few years ago I had the great gift of being invited into the bedroom of my friend David Sacks, born in 1968 just like me but brought to the end of his life by cancer that, by the time it was discovered, had erupted throughout his body. After a glorious and grace-filled year of life made possible by medical treatment, David's illness outran the drugs. In his last days he lay on his bed. His body was now unbearably thin and weak. David was an internationally celebrated photographer, but he would never make another image. He had sent me countless text messages over the years, but now he was beyond text messaging. He had created a Facebook group where he and his wife, Angie, chronicled the story of his cancer diagnosis, treatment, and all the ups and downs that followed, but he would never again update it.

But he was still there, still with us, still able, just barely, to hear us praying and singing—able, in moments of lucidity, to open his eyes, take in the small group of family and friends gathered around his bed and know he was not alone. His brother brought a guitar and we sang, several nights in a row, Matt Redman's song "10,000 Reasons." The technology was over. The easy-everywhere dream had ended. Now we could only be here, in our own vulnerable bodies, present to the immensely hard reality of a friend, father, son, and husband dying. Over the bed was a framed, calligraphic rendering of David and Angie's wedding vows.

“It was one of the hardest places I have ever been,” says Crouch. “It was one of the most holy places I have ever been. It was one of the best places I have ever been. [Yet,] we are meant to build this kind of life together: the kind of life that, at the end, is completely dependent upon one another; the kind of life that ultimately transcends, and does not need, the easy solutions of technology because it is caught up in something more true and more lasting than anything our technological world can invent. We are meant to die in one another's arms, surrounded by prayer and song, knowing beyond knowing that we are loved. We are meant for so much more than technology can ever give us—above all, for the wisdom and courage that it will never give us. We are meant to spur one another along on the way to a better life, the life that really is life. Why not begin living that life, together, now? *Adapted from Andy Crouch, The Tech-Wise Family (Baker Books, 2017), pages 203-205.* An understanding of family that is supportive, nurturing, God-honoring and includes both blood family and Christian brothers and sisters.

In South Korea a pastor and his household have chosen to create a family with babies who are literally thrown-away by their parents. “The documentary film, The Drop Box, tells the story. Worldwide, millions of children are abandoned at birth. But in South Korea, because of a strict social code, the problem is especially acute—and it's growing. Unwanted children are often left to die in an alley or street corner or dumped in a trash bin. Occasionally they're left on someone's doorstep. Pastor Lee Jong-Rak, pastor of Jusarang (God's Love) Community Church in Seoul, South Korea, decided to take action. When some of those unwanted newborns started being placed on Pastor Lee's church steps, he and his wife, spurred by their Christian faith and the experience of raising a son with extreme disabilities, began to take in these children. Because of the long, cold winters in South Korea, he eventually built a "drop box" into the front wall of the church. With a door that opens from the outside as well as the inside, it's like a baby-sized drawer, complete with light bulb, heater, and a loud bell that alerts his family when a baby is placed in the box. Today, Pastor Lee's family and a small group of volunteers provide a loving home for more than a dozen mildly to severely disabled children at a time. Over the years, they have saved hundreds of abandoned newborns. Some have criticized Pastor Lee. They say his compassion encourages mothers to abandon their children. But history shows that abandonment has been happening for generations. Despite the criticism, enormous cost, overwhelming amount of work, and the lack of any government funding—Pastor Lee and his family continue. Night after night, Pastor Lee stays up listening for the alarm. When a new baby arrives, he races downstairs, bundles up the child, and prays.”

I believe Pastor Lee is living out this broader definition of what a church family can look like. Through God’s love we can create a family who welcomes and loves people from different cultures, a place to care for the abandoned, care for those who didn’t receive real love from parents, or those who are just far away from home. The Christian view of family is a family of faith where we become mothers and fathers and brothers and sisters to one another.

This has become a central focus of my life. You have heard me say that early in our marriage, when Keith and I had both a daughter and a son, I told God, “Thank You, Lord; that’s enough. No more blood children for us.” God’s answer to that was “OK, but when you stand before me after death, I want you to be able to say: ‘Here I am and the children you have given me – spiritual children you helped birth from many cultures.” And God has been helping me fulfill that vision. In addition, the Lord has given others over the years who have become like spiritual sons and daughters to me whom I have loved and discipled and helped grow up into maturity in Christ. These believers are as precious to me as my own blood children.

That broader understanding of a spiritual family is the essence of the church. Chuck Colson, in his book *The Body, the church as a* family “has bonds that occur nowhere else and memories of good and joy and laughter that bind it together. When a family has Christ as its Center, that family ‘s bond creates safety, belonging, affirmation and purpose in life. The family represents home. It is like a glue holding people together individually and in relationship.”

This is the strength of a family-style church and it’s what we want to foster at New Hope. We have made the choice to have Christ as the One who can hold us together, who can fill us with His love, who can teach us how to look out for and care for one another, how to pray for each other and listen to each other, **(pp)**how to encourage each other and build each other up, how to forgive each other and hold each other to the highest. But it is love that takes commitment and is available; it is also love that is loyal – that chooses to fulfill these responsibilities of family for one another and not just come to a church for what you get out of it.

That kind of love takes work and time, doesn’t it? And it works itself out in deeds. The words of the Apostle James come to mind: 14-17Dear friends, do you think you’ll get anywhere in this if you learn all the right words but never do anything? Does merely talking about faith indicate that a person really has it? For instance, you come upon an old friend dressed in rags and half-starved and say, “Good morning, friend! Be clothed in Christ! Be filled with the Holy Spirit!” and walk off without providing so much as a coat or a cup of soup—where does that get you? Isn’t it obvious that God-talk without God-acts is outrageous nonsense?” James 2:14-17.

Those deeds are how we serve one another.  *After Jesus told the disciples to serve one another,* he promptly shocked them by washing their feet. To wash another’s feet takes humility. So, practically, we serve our brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in the Body of Christ by laying aside our own way of doing things, our ego and maybe most significantly our agenda and time priorities to meet the needs of others. I think that’s impossible unless the Holy Spirit does it for us. We are so naturally self-centered – that’s why the church has so often been seen as a place **for** us – to meet **my** need. Instead, foot washing shows us I need to lay aside my needs so I can concentrate on meeting another’s need. I choose to focus on how God wants to build up His body, the family of faith, through me. That means that this church will not just be an add-on that we fit into our schedule from time to time, but a place instead where we seriously look each week to see how we can serve one another. Our own vibrant Christian faith actually depends on this beloved. We cannot thrive as Christians in a partial walk with God, outside the family of faith. Foot-washing service cares for others out of agape love. Christ’s love for the disciples led him to foot washing and then laying down his life for us. So we must ask the question: What is His love leading **you** to do for others in the church?

Jesus upended the first century Jewish understanding of faith to include a much bigger family model. It’s the model that He died, rose and sent the Holy Spirit to create. May we live that model today and show outsiders what being a Christian really means as we are devoted to one another in love – for His sake. Amen.

Dr. Mary Lou Codman-Wilson 11/11/18