

## ***Kindred Spirits***

Mark 3:31-35

I suppose, it goes without saying that it must not have been easy to be one of Jesus' brothers or sisters. Think about it. You know you don't have much standing when the firstborn in your household is declared to be the Son of God by your own Jewish mother! Like any family, it's hard enough to be reminded that Mom always liked your brother best, but it's really unfair to know that God Almighty does as well!

How can you ever beat your brother who is so "perfect" in everybody's eyes? Then, there's no point in blaming him for anything, because no one will ever believe you. You have to live with the fact that his accomplishments will always dominate the annual "Christmas" letter, because *he's the reason for the season!* "Jesus performed several miracles this year ... Jesus walked on water and raised a dead man ...Isn't my firstborn Son just divine!"—yadda, yadda, yadda—when will it stop? Compared to Jesus, everyone else is just a schmuck!

Honestly, I can't say if any of Jesus' brothers or sisters felt this way. No one really knows, I suppose. And in case you weren't taught this in Sunday School, Mary and Joseph actually had plenty of children after their initial Immaculate Conception. The second born was fairly well known in the annals of early Christianity. He was James, who eventually led the early Christian movement in Jerusalem in what is viewed as "the mother church." According to the rosters supplied by gospel writers, Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55), the rest

of the brothers were Joses (or Joseph), Judas (Jude), and Symeon (Simon), and his two sisters, per tradition, were Mary and Salome. To round out the family line, tradition holds that Cleopas, the one whom the risen Lord met on the road to Emmaus, was his uncle, the brother of Jesus' father, Joseph and that Mary's mother, the grandmother of Jesus, was named, Anne or Anna—a form of Hannah.

For centuries, the Church (particularly Catholicism) has ignored or tried to cover up the familial ties Jesus had, even though there is a compelling case based on early Christian writings that the extended family of Jesus established a bit of a dynasty in the leadership in the early decades of the church, especially in Jerusalem and Palestine.<sup>1</sup> The kindred ties apparently were strong and lasting.

If this is true, then it seems odd, does it not, that in the Gospels Jesus dismisses his family on more than one occasion. Whenever I've read passages such as today's lectionary text, I've assumed this to be a natural separation between a mother and son—much like a young adult leaving home. Except in first century Galilee, for Jesus to leave his family behind as firstborn son, this would be very complicated to do and highly criticized as irresponsible. It would bring shame upon him and his family, aside from the economic impact.

It's clear from Mark's telling of the story that there were some household tensions between them. From Jesus' perspective, after having spent most of his adult life tending to matters at home in Nazareth as head of the household following his father's death, time was running out for one who felt called to his messianic role (Luke

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<sup>1</sup> See, among others, James Tabor, *The Jesus Dynasty: The Hidden History of Jesus, His Royal Family, and the Birth of Christianity*, Simon & Schuster, 2007.

tells us Jesus was thirty at the time he began his mission; the average lifespan for males in Galilee at that time was around the mid-thirties!). Once he left home to pursue his mission, in texts like this one, Jesus may have felt frustrated and imposed upon by his mother and siblings seemingly trying to bring him home to take care of them.

On the other hand, his mother and siblings likely would have viewed it differently. This is evident by what Mark wrote earlier in the chapter several verses in advance of this text. In 3:21ff, we read:

When his family heard [Jesus was exorcising demons], they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.

So, for them, Jesus’ behavior (coupled with his unexpected departure) left them wondering if he had lost his mind. It wasn’t only shameful, but chasing dreams was sheer crazy-making.

With these tensions in place, it’s not surprising, then, that this little family encounter didn’t go so well, with Jesus’ rather startling dismissal of his kinfolk: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” From his perspective, it was time for the kindred ties to be loosened.

However, something else was going on as well. Namely, Jesus was making a fairly strong statement about what happens when kindred ties are not at the center of one’s life.

As Ched Myers puts it:

The alienation between Jesus and his family is mutual, and he refuses to see them (3:33). If they cannot accept his vocation, he cannot recognize their kindredness. Mark then introduces a new kinship model, based upon obedience, not to the family or clan patriarch, but to God alone (3:35). Jesus’ challenge to the traditional authority structures of Palestinian society is now complete. He has repudiated the “old fabric” (2:21), in order

to make way for the new order. The fundamental unit of “resocialization” into the kingdom will be the new family, the community of discipleship.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, Jesus wasn’t being rude to his family, as much as he was focused on another type of family he was in the process of creating—one that was chosen and intentionally close. This new family consisted of those who became a part of his movement—those who were following the call of God to repent and start living according to the explicit and implicit values espoused by Jesus.

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

What we have here is a significant relational shift taking place in Jesus’ life. Jesus’ disciples and followers were his new family of choice, with relational ties that were equal to, if not stronger, than the familial bonds he felt with his own brothers and sisters. These were the ones with whom he was now spending his days and nights. They were the ones who shared meals with him, who listened to his teachings and help shape his prophetic mission to challenge the powers that be. His closest ties in the world would no longer be with kinfolk, but with those who were kindred spirits.

On many levels, this reflects what happens when anyone’s relational bonds shift. It’s not unlike what occurs once young people move out of their parents’ home. Namely, it’s fairly common for them to find a set of friends that will provide companionship and meaningful relationships, usually formed in a workplace, or around common interests, romance, values, and activities. Often, these friends replace the primary relationships of one’s family, sometimes to the sorrow of parents and siblings. Many people form families of

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<sup>2</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man*, Orbis, 1988, 2008, p. 168.

choice, based on who they want to be or have become. This family of choice will often be their preferred company on a regular basis, as well as the spiritual support they drawn upon as adults. Real family tends to be with those of the heart more than blood—frequently, kindred spirits bind us even more tightly than kinfolk.

Friends and kindred spirits are important to us, in part because we would not be able to move beyond our familial ties and roles to be something more than those which were defined by our homes and primary relationships. Kindred spirits help us to mature into our deepest values and desires because they are less dependent upon us to fill a role or a need in their own lives, as often happens with family.

Jesus' example of moving beyond kindred ties and away from the obligations of the firstborn son was in many respects a “teachable moment” for all who would follow him—those who would later create the early church. This is reflected in all the difficult verses we find in the gospels which seem to convey a harsh anti-family tone, such as:

For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me... (Mt. 10:35-37; cf. Lk. 9:57-62)

As hard as it may be to hear this coming from the mouth of Jesus, this relational shift was important, because to follow Jesus' example and teachings often required outright rejection of traditional customs, roles, and social conventions nurtured in the typical first-century Jewish household.

What I mean is, the values Jesus proclaimed often chafed with the usual notion of family, by extending a sense of identity and responsibility to others beyond the norms and boundaries of blood

and tribe. For instance, in the Jesus community, women and children, along with servants, were treated with more dignity, value, and respect than in the traditional patriarchal home (i.e., women given the same status as men). Likewise, the generous sharing of material possessions and food with those outside of the family tended to run against the norms of family life: take care of your kinfolk before you show concern for others. In the same way, the conventional wisdom everyone learned in the home about who to associate with and who to avoid didn't apply either when it came to Jesus' radical redefinition of love and hospitality and inclusion—affirming every person, regardless of their state, status, or condition in life. So much of what Jesus proclaimed conflicted with common norms for daily life that every child would learn in their home and through their culture and religion. Instead of family first, others second, it was outsiders become family with no distinctions made.

Understandably, it required a breaking away from home and village life for Jesus to implement this reordering of society and family relations, which he envisioned and proclaimed in building the commonwealth of God. It wouldn't have happened in Nazareth. If one believed in Jesus' mission, it commanded a radical redefinition of family, from kinfolk to kindred spirits. That's why Jesus created such a stir when he dismissed his mother and siblings in favor of his new friends. It was his prophetic statement that the world was about to change. Granted, it seems cruel to those who put family above anyone else, but it was Jesus' way to create enough distance so that the values and aspirations of God's new ordering of the world would not be undermined by traditional family order or mores that imposed

obligations and reinforced many injustices in society. It so happens that in time his family seemed to embrace his mission, as evidenced by their leadership in the early church.

Now I recognize the first century isn't the 21<sup>st</sup> century—the patriarchal world of Galilee doesn't mirror our own. Still, Jesus' word and actions make an impact on us today. We continually are challenged to extend the notion of family beyond our own blood ties and tribe, as well as our perception of neighbor beyond those who live near us, are like us, or who share our values and interests or nationality.

For most people, that's no easier to do today than it was 2000 years ago. For one thing, it's hard to accept that family doesn't take precedent over everyone else when following the call of God. It's equally difficult to open ourselves up to trust those who aren't like us, in whatever way that seems important. In the general public, we're still battling barriers to inclusion and respect for others in this generation. We've haven't yet arrived to where we naturally view the household of God as embracing the entirety of humankind in all of its colors, perspectives, languages, conditions, and beliefs. We are still inclined to be tribal in our choices and priorities.

For us to fully capture the power and intent of Jesus' mission, blood ties have to give way to those who are relations of the heart. Many of us have already discovered this in interesting ways over the years. For instance, through our work in Mexico, I feel like family to our friends in Chiapas, who we've come to know and share a faith and vision for a just world, working together even from a distance to

address the levels of violence, poverty, and social barriers for Mayans in southern Mexico.

As a church, we've also shifted our relational ties toward parts of our denominational family who share our moral sensibilities for justice and inclusion, especially affirming and supporting those discerning their sexual orientation or gender identities often in conflict with the more conventional norms of their birth home.

Even today, we are stepping up in our One Great Hour of Sharing offering in solidarity with those who have been through devastating disasters, whose homes have been destroyed, or who are rebuilding their lives post trauma—those we don't personally know, but still pray for and with whom we share our personal resources in order to make their lives better in their time of need. It becomes more than charity; it is a relational shift from only taking care of our own household in order to generously help someone else in need. In doing so, we then share a worldview similar to Jesus' care for the least of these and for expanding a familial tie across all the typical boundaries and statuses and borders and identities and colors and ages and anything else that tend to define and divide up our world.

It's about moving beyond kinfolk to relate to kindred spirits around the world with whom we will create spiritual ties. Like Jesus, whose sense of family was with those who chose to be with him and follow his ways, who shared their lives in community with him, and who found new life in him and found it abundantly, we too find our brothers and sisters and mother in those who share a similar spirit. That's where we find our spiritual home.

Though two thousand years separate our lives, you and I are still building this community with Christ and with others, generation after generation, doing so, until “the fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above.”

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