

Sermon for Christ Church, Spotsylvania, VA
Proper 5, Year B, June 10, 2018
The Rev. Bill Queen, "Who Is Our Family?"
Mark 3:20-35

what does the word 'family' mean to you?; does it conjure up nostalgic images like those of a Norman Rockwell painting?; perhaps you can recall his depiction of three generations of bright faces of an American family gathered around the turkey platter at a Thanksgiving dinner table; I'm not sure that was an especially typical American family even when it was painted, and in the years that have elapsed since it appeared on the cover of The Saturday Evening Post magazine in 1943, the typical American family, if there is even such a thing as that, has undoubtedly changed greatly

maybe you draw more from recollections of your own family when you think about what 'family' means; if your experiences are anything like mine, you probably cannot single out one image, emotion, or memory that sums it up completely; 'family' represents a complex set of different relationships between the different members of any family; it has to account for how those family relationships have changed over time; and it has to account for how the composition of your family has changed from that of your parents' home, to that of your own home, and possibly even to that of your children's homes

maybe 'family' is just so complex an idea that we cannot say what it means, but only say who we are willing to include in the roster of 'our family'; someone who is technically 'family' may fall out of favor and no longer be welcome at 'family' gatherings; and we may have people who are not blood relatives—the informally adopted parents or grandparents or grandchildren, the godparents, those we call an 'aunt Susan' or an 'uncle Don', the close family friends young or old, the boyfriends and girlfriends of our children, and others—individuals who have become important enough to get included in the expected makeup of 'our family'

to add to the mix of this, in our Gospel reading today this same question about who is 'family' gets addressed by Jesus; our story finds Jesus at a point in his life when he is wildly popular and known throughout the land; people are seeking him out in great crowds for his teaching and for his healing; and what is his family's reaction to all this?; they believe that he has lost his mind;

they want to restrain him and bring him back home; they want to get him out of the dangerous limelight; they want him to forget all those shenanigans about being an itinerant prophet; they probably want him back at work in the family's carpentry business, since he, as the eldest son, would have learned that trade from Joseph and be the main breadwinner for the family now that Joseph is no longer alive; imagine for just a minute how the world might be different now if they had succeeded in talking him into going back home

well, we know Jesus' family did not succeed in getting him to go home; when Jesus learns that his mother, brothers, and sisters are outside calling for him he asks those around him, "Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?"; Jesus himself gives the answer, first by saying, "Here are my mother and my brothers and my sisters;" he is recognizing that those disciples and even the strangers who are present with him, those who came to him exactly because Jesus was the prophet, the teacher, and the healer they were seeking—they are the family that Jesus has chosen as his own; but he doesn't stop there; he gives an even more general answer as he goes on to say, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother"

what exactly is this "will of God" that we are supposed to do?; the best list that Jesus gives us is found in Matthew ch 25 (35-36, 40), in the parable of the sheep and the goats; there it says, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me;" the people in the parable aren't aware when they had served Jesus or failed to have served him in these actions, so the parable goes on to specify that, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are [listen carefully] members of my family, you did it to me;" this parable not only tells us what to do, it also gives us an expanded definition of Jesus' family; Jesus identifies himself with the people in the greatest physical need; the people most in need of his ministries are also his family

there are four ramifications of our Gospel story today as it is understood along with this parable; (1st) we have a list of six ministries that are God's will that we are to do: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick, and visit the imprisoned; (2nd) doing these ministries grants us membership in God's family;

(3rd) we are to recognize that anyone else who does these ministries is also a member of God's family along with us; and (4th) we are to recognize that anyone who needs these ministries is also a member of God's family along with us

notice what is not here; there is no statement that you have to believe any particular doctrine or hold any theological position to be in God's family—just do the work; as we say in our Post-Communion prayer, “send us out to do the work you have given us to do”; also missing is any statement of exclusion whatsoever; no one is set aside as unworthy to be a part of God's family

this question about who is to be considered ‘family’ has gotten answered by Jesus in a way that probably surprises us; it shows us that it is not up to us to decide who is to be included in our family—Jesus has told us who is to be included in our definition of family members; and it is about as widely inclusive a list as could be imagined; it is inclusive in a way that defies our usual conceptions of who is God's family—and of who is ‘our family;’ so keep these passages in mind as you go about your activities this week; prayerfully, attentively, mindfully keep your eyes, your mind, your heart, your soul open to this inclusive list; be aware of your mothers, and your brothers, and your sisters in Christ about you; both those who are carrying out ministries along with you, and those who are receiving ministries through you; seek out and serve all of the members of our one big family