

FAMILY RELATIONS

Mark 3:20-35

It should be alarming to learn that although most other causes of death have decreased, suicides have grown in significant numbers over the past twenty years. In the face of this trend in society, Stephen Asma has written a book entitled *Why We Need Religion*. It may strike us as odd that a Columbia University philosophy professor suggests a truth that would better arise out of the academic disciplines of either theology or sociology but several studies support the truth that religion matters.

Along with many others, young people in growing numbers declare themselves free of religion and its corruption even as they grow in spirituality and its comfort. Rather than participate in church or synagogue or mosque, these “nones” as they are known have “taken up more individual forms of spiritualism, including yoga, mediation, healing stones, Wiccan spell casting and astrology.” [Asma, Stephen, Faith? There’s an app for that, *LA Times*, June 7, 2018, page A13] Magical thinking dominates while participation in community wanes. Though asserting that technology enables ever larger numbers of connections, those studied are observed as being ever more isolated as face-to-face interactions give way to screens of every type and size. These “nones” individually search out and even create their own belief systems and they do so alone. Solitary practice has replaced social bonding.

In contrast, people who participate in organized religion “tend to be happier, have better health, say married, live longer and commit less crime. Further, “a growing body of research has suggested that organized religion reduces the risk of depression.” [Ibid] Asma declares that these benefits seem to be a result of “communal prayer, storytelling, singing, celebrations, rite-of-passage ceremonies and even fasting.” [Ibid.] The professor concludes that “these group activities create the deep bonds that positive psychology recognizes as the main ingredient for a happy life.” [Ibid.] An earlier philosopher, Aristotle, describes the best effects of religion as *eudaimonia* which can be translated as ‘well being’ or ‘flourishing’ but more literally translated as “good spirit”. Ironically, “none” are seeking to develop their lives to this end though their tactics tend to lead them elsewhere.

It is this matter of “spirit”---good and otherwise---that prompts discussion between Jesus and those who increasingly oppose his word and

behavior. The gospels record that Jesus attracted a good deal of attention because of his ability to heal and cast out demons, the latter being 'evil spirits'. People would bring others who were diseased or possessed to Jesus and he would free them of either and sometimes both, the two seemingly having some relationship even in his time. The powers that this rabbi exhibited were highly suspect in the minds of the religious leaders of his time and place, principally because Jesus appeared to be more fruitful in his ministry and was attracting a growing number of people. We hear that he was accused of using the power of evil, even aligning himself with Beelzebub, the prince of darkness, to do his work. Jesus responds with a truth that has been applied far more widely than the Israel of his day. "A house divided against itself cannot stand" represents a truth that has been painfully expressed over the ages as empires fall and families disintegrate. Abraham Lincoln saw this is a reality that caused a civil war and used this saying quoted by Jesus to rally support for his crusade to unify the nation.

Concern for 'house' lends itself to a discussion of 'family'. The powerful and sometimes strange behavior of Jesus caused great concern among the members of his family, such concern always encouraged by behavior that seems odd, such as his practices of healing often appeared to be. Mother and brothers are summoned to care for this one who has seemingly lost his mind, though the truth was that the spirit, the good spirit, was the source of his word and work. In the face of family, Jesus counters this accusation of mental illness with a new form of thinking when he states that "however does the will of God is my brother and sister." Over the ages, this idea has expressed itself simply as people of faith have literally called each other 'brother' and 'sister' and sometimes 'mother' and 'father'. Such naming points to a deeper understanding that as God's creation, we are all God's children, related not so much by blood but by water, the water of baptism.

Though we may cling to the tradition that "blood is thicker than water", many could attest that although we may not abandon the family of our birth, we may discover in others beyond that genetic group people who provide greater satisfaction than those who carry similar name and early experience. Our brothers and sisters may be people who share our lives more fully than those with whom we were raised. The Christian faith would attest to the strengths of those bonds brought about by water, the water of baptism.

As we baptize, even today, we declare the one who receives water and word to be part of the family of Christ, the people of God. Though early Roman critics strongly concluded that Christianity should be destroyed, blotted out of history because it seemed to break up families, the truth of faith was and is that baptism created a greater, more intense, even more beneficial family experience. Followers of Jesus coalesced into a community whose bonds were forged out of

intentional experiences of gathering, sharing, and serving. Beliefs gave way to believing, believing sustained by mutual love and affection for these new ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’.

And how is this family to grow and be sustained? Just as we do today, the family of God prospers because we include more in this family and we gather regularly to remember and rejoice in these associations. Family matters. As one denomination among others, we resist the temptation of both convenience and privacy as we baptize in the midst of the community of the church. Our liturgy reminds us that at baptism, the congregation takes up responsibility to grow the faith of the child, the youth, the adult in every way that it can, recognized as well that it is the work of the Holy Spirit of God that brings forth maturing faith. Our tasks is to continue to draw those who are baptized back to God, particularly as God is revealed in Christ, and to then send these same water-washed people out into the world as witnesses to the love and grace that creates the bonds of this family.

Professor Asma concludes his reflection with these words, “What nones are pursuing, *eudomonia*, [that is well-being or good spirit], comes only when you stop chasing it and start serving others through communal action. Religion figured this out a long time ago.” [Ibid]

Welcome, Rayan Laine, to the family, the family of God, this God who blesses us and sends us out to be blessing to all the world. Come, receive the waters of baptism and go and serve for not only are we with you, but God is with you, always. Thanks be to God. Amen.

