

What Defines A Family?

Mother's Day

Text: Mark 3:35; Acts 1:14

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

There's a piece from *The Atlantic Monthly*, having to do with families of which I'll read only a paragraph. It's "Household Principles Concerning Food and Drink."

Laws Pertaining to Dessert: For we judge between the plate that is unclean and the plate that is clean, saying first, if the plate is clean, then you shall have dessert. But of the unclean plate, the laws are these: If you have eaten most of your meat and two bites of your peas with each bite consisting of not less than three peas each, or a total of six peas eaten where I can see and you have also eaten enough of your potatoes to fill two forks, both forkfuls eaten where I can see, then you shall have dessert. But, if you eat a lesser number of peas and yet you eat the potatoes, still you shall not have dessert. And if you eat the peas, yet leave the potatoes uneaten, you shall not have dessert. No, not even a small portion thereof. And if you try to deceive by moving the potatoes or peas around with a fork that it may appear you have eaten what you have not, you will fall into iniquity and I will know and you shall have no dessert.

To the word of God that sometimes sounds similar to that, the Lesson from the Epistle, Acts 1:6:

So, when they had come together they asked him, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" And he said to them, "It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has fixed by His own authority, but you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth." And when he had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven." Then they returned to Jerusalem from the Mount called Olivet which is near Jerusalem, a

sabbath's day journey away. And when they had entered, they went into the upper room where they were staying. Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus and Simon the Zealot, and Judas the son of James. All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer together with the women and *Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers.*

The Word of the Lord.

Then reading from the Gospel, the third chapter of Mark and verse 19:

Then he went home, that is Jesus went home, and the crowd came together again so that they could not even eat. And when his friends heard it, they went out to seize him, for they said, "He is beside himself." And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebub, and by the prince of demons, he casts out the demons." And Jesus called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if the house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. But, no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods unless he first binds the strong man. Then, indeed, he may plunder his house. Truly I say to you all sins will be forgiven the sons of men and whatever blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin." For they said, "He has an unclean spirit."

And his mother and his brothers came and standing outside, they said to him and called him, and the crowd was sitting around him and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside asking for you," and he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my mother, my brother, my sister."

The Gospel of the Lord.

Well, it's Mother's Day, that High Holy Day on the liturgical calendar. Who could miss it? Seems like we've been bombarded for some time now holding out all kinds of wonderful things that we can do for our mothers. A couple weeks ago, Nancy and I were in that cavernous paradise of consumer lust, Marshall Fields, down in the Chicago Loop, and, usually in order that she may pursue and enjoy her buying without harassment, she says, "Could you meet me in about an hour?" and we identify some spot. Of course, I always fail to remember whether we came in on Randolph or State or Wabash or where, so I was looking a bit dismayed. One couldn't go up in the aisle without being accosted by some lady with some wonderful merchandise to offer, and I tried to avoid contact as much as I could, but one caught me squarely and she said, "How do you do, sir?" She said, "Are

you looking for a wonderful gift for a woman?" I said, "No, I'm looking for a wonderful woman." And she said, "Oh, someone like you shouldn't have any problem," and I said, "So they say."

Later, Nancy and I did find each other and I managed to get out of there without buying too many fragrances that day but, as I said, Mother's Day is a day that has conquered America. Better said, Mother's Day hasn't conquered America; Hallmark has conquered America through the brilliant strategy of Madison Avenue, and so here we are in divine worship, talking about Mother's Day.

There are some purists who would not deviate from the liturgical calendar, no matter what's coming down, and therefore on a day like this, there would be no mention of mothers because this is the last Sunday of Eastertide and it's Ascension Sunday, since we don't celebrate Ascension Day on Ascension Day which was 40 days after Easter, which was Thursday. And those purists wouldn't deviate from that liturgical calendar and would probably bore you to tears today with stories about the Ascension, and I'm not a purist, obviously. I deviate whenever necessary, but it's nice when you've been around so long you can find those little passages of scripture that manage to have both Ascension and the mother in one paragraph, and that's what we have this morning. It is Ascension Day and Luke, particularly Luke, wants to make sure that there is a hiatus between the historical ministry of Jesus in the days of his flesh and the ministry of the Church in the power of the Spirit. Luke has that sense of the historical unfolding, the stages of redemption, and we have crucifixion and resurrection, and then Luke is the one who tells us that there was a period of 40 days in which Jesus manifested himself, so to speak, to say, "I'm really alive. It is really me." And then that period of various and sundry appearances seemed to come to an end, by and large, and Luke even makes the Ascension an event witnessed by the disciples, and it is an important movement into the next stage which we will celebrate next week on the Day of Pentecost and the baptism of the Spirit of God.

But, Luke does something interesting that's not altogether unimportant for Mother's Day, and that is that he gets Mary the mother of Jesus and his brothers back into the family with Jesus. You know, Jesus and his mother had their tensions and their struggles. In fact, during this past Lent just a few weeks ago, I used that Mark passage that says that when Jesus inaugurated his ministry and was besieged by the crowds in that time of his popularity, that there were those who saw him as a threat and they said, "He's gone off the deep end. He's crazy." And he got into a confrontation with his critics and denied that what he was doing, he was doing under demonic influence. Rather, he was doing it under the Spirit of God. There was a sharp confrontation, but anyway, the word was out - he's gone off the deep end, and Mary and his brothers, Mark tells us, came to where he was teaching in order to bring him home, because he was an embarrassment to them and I'm sure they were concerned about him. We can understand that. Haven't the newspapers and the media been full of accounts of families who have agonized over sons and daughters that committed the mass

suicide, taking their cue from Hepplewhite, that the celestial sign of the Hale-Bopp Comet, said it's time to depart? And so, we've heard a lot of stories of alienation and estrangement, of sons and daughters that hadn't been in touch for years or perhaps some touch, and yet, the colliding and collision of ideology and of faith commitments, and so forth.

During the season of Lent I preached on that text under the theme, "Love Hurts." Love does hurt. And Mary and her other sons went to bring Jesus home because they were concerned about him, because we do live under the pressure of community opinion, and there is a kind of conventional wisdom out there and an expected behavior, and when that's moved away from, we get very uneasy. Mary and her other sons couldn't get close to him, there were so many people, so they handed him a note: "Your mother and your brothers are here."

Jesus' response was, "My mother and my brothers? Who are my mother and my brothers? The ones who do the will of God, those are my mother and my brothers and my sisters."

I don't think that Jesus was meaning those that belong to my denomination. I don't think that was a narrowly religious kind of thing. I think that Jesus was saying that sometimes there is a vision of life, an understanding of its meaning and of its purpose. Sometimes there is that ultimate concern that moves one from the depths, and when that isn't shared, then it's difficult to bridge that fellowship. There is estrangement and there is alienation, and Jesus was saying there is a natural given family. But, he said, there is a deeper family, a community of ultimate concern and vision and commitment that transcends those natural ties of the family circle.

That was a hard word for Mary. I linked it with the word from the cross in John's Gospel, where there is a hint that maybe that estrangement and alienation had been healed, because he says, "Woman, behold your son. Son, behold your mother."

I must have made that point rather strongly on that Lenten service because, when I got home for dinner, Nancy said, "I don't like Jesus." Now, that really makes me break out into a sweat. Of course, why couldn't he have just said, "Mother," at the cross? It's not comfortable, is it? There's something we would desire more from this mother-son relationship. But in the passage in Acts we get something more, because there, not without reason, not just as an aside, but I think intentionally, very purposely, Luke says following the Ascension, following the instruction of Jesus to go to the city and to wait for the baptism of the Spirit, to be empowered to carry out that mission of the Gospel, the disciples gathered in the upper room and they were praying and there were with them the women who were a part of that intimate circle, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers. Luke was saying that that given family had eventuated or had emerged into that deeper dimension of human community of shared value and vision, of shared ultimate concern. It's the last notice we have of Mary the mother of Jesus.

But, his brother James became the leader of the Jerusalem Church. His brother James was the ongoing observant Jew who followed Jesus as Messiah. That's not easy to do. But he became the leader of the Jerusalem community and the Jerusalem community was that conservative Jesus community that was in tension with Paul who was that apostle called to the Gentile world.

It's interesting to speculate on whether Jesus' own brother James got it right or whether Paul saw through even more profoundly than James the difference between that Jerusalem Jesus Jewish community and that developing Gentile mission. But, it is good to know that Mary and the brothers of Jesus were able to move beyond the givenness of family in which there was so much tension and estrangement to that commonality of vision and value so that they could be a part of that new family that Jesus formed, a family bound together more profoundly than any given natural ties can do.

So, what is a family? A family is, obviously, to begin with, that given circle of parents and children where children are cared for and where they are nurtured and they are formed. And there's a great deal of discussion about the family in our society today and there can be no argument about the fact that that basic social unit has come upon difficult days. The family, ideally, is a place for care, for nurture, for provision, for the formation into a humane existence, and it can take different shapes and forms, but that function needs to be fulfilled, or a society will be in trouble, as we well know.

I want to take a moment this morning to congratulate you on your families. These children that jammed this chancel this morning are beautiful, aren't they? Shining faces, ribbons in their hair, bouncing and bowing and singing their hearts out - they are beautiful. You've done well. Your children are marvelous, and we are committed to their nurture, with you, committed to the support of the family. I don't know of a place where it's happening any better, from the Worship Center kids right on up through, where they are being grounded in the biblical story and being invited to sing and to dance, bringing it to expression, where they are invited to wonder and to stand in awe, to raise any question and to pursue any angle or experiment. Your children are wonderful and here they are being given a marvelous support in their growing faith formation.

Last Monday night I participated in the Elders' Meeting with the Confirmands who will be received here next Sunday. Those young people are outstanding; they're bright; they're free, they are open, they raise questions, they feel at home here, and to hear their word is wonderful. Congratulations on the job you've done in your homes in the shaping and the forming of your young people. And once in a while there's one or two brave enough even to engage me in a one-to-one, maybe in an interview or a conversation, not intimidated by this old man. We sit across the table from one another and I am always so impressed with your sons and daughters. They are the best and the brightest, and when you see them all scrubbed up and clean and serious, my goodness, they are impressive. I like them

one at a time. You know, you get two or three or four together with a baseball cap on backwards with the sweatshirt that defies the possibility that there could be a body inside, the sleeves hanging down to the kneecaps, dressed in jeans where the crotch meets the kneecaps, and the legs mop up the landscape as they move. Now, they scare me. But, they're wonderful, and so I want to say this morning you're doing a wonderful job with your children and, when we hear all the horror stories about the youth, I have to say I don't see it. I don't see it here.

That given family is absolutely critical for the formation of children and young people that will go out and launch themselves, and that's the second thing I would say about a family, *it is of limited function, not absolute*. The family is to form and shape and prepare and support and launch, and that's the tricky part. That's where the tension came in between Jesus and his mother. And it's so understandable, because we do love them. We do care about them. We hurt for all the potential pitfalls that are lying out there for their destruction. And yet, what defines a family? Not only love that cares and gets them started, but the trust to let them fly, the letting go, the taking off of the controls. Oh, Good Lord, it's scary. But necessary.

Jesus could not go home with Mary. In the Gnostic Gospels, a group of manuscripts that was discovered in 1945 in Egypt, made accessible to us by the likes of an Elaine Pagels, she lifts up one of her favorite passages. *The Gospel of Thomas*, the scholars feel, is early, maybe even earlier than Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. It is a Gnostic Gospel. It is that alternative interpretation and understanding of Jesus. It's one of those interpretations and understandings that fell on the cutting room floor but, like Elaine Pagels says, you know, the winners write the history, eh? Well, anyway, here's the Gospel of Thomas, a statement from Jesus that says,

"If you bring forth what is within you, it will save you. But if you do not bring forth what is within you, what is within you will destroy you."

That could be a sermon, too, couldn't it? If there is something in you that is intrinsically you, unless it comes to expression you will die, your soul will wither, and what does not come forth will destroy you. Jesus said if you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you are being true to yourself (to thine own self be true), and allow that which is deepest in you, that passion, that vision - let it come forth.

Risky? Life is risky. The family plays an absolutely critical role, but it has a limited function. There is a time for our sons and daughters to fly and for us to trust them and to love them, no matter whether the flight plan pleases us or not.

What makes a family? Well, there's always that possibility of the tension dissolving and the alienation being bridged, and community established at a deeper level than ever. That's why I like the picture of Mary and Jesus' brothers praying in the upper room. Once again, not in a narrowly religious sense, but in a

sense that they saw in Jesus that ultimate concern which they finally could come, as well, to embrace and to become a part of that new age, that new family, that new world.

So, what defines a family? Good solid foundations given lovingly to nurture and form, to be sure. And a certain limited function, allowing the freedom to move out. But then always the openness to one another to listen, to change, to forgive, to heal and to move to an even deeper human community which is more than simply the given.

They say that blood is thicker than water, and certainly it's borne out again and again. But, there is something thicker than blood. It is that shared community, that common, human community that binds us, soul to soul and spirit to spirit, into a family beyond anything that the given family can provide. This is family. This is a good place.