Church Family

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Mark 3:31-35

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The picture on your screen represents an enduring image from the Great Depression. Photographer Dorothy Lange was returning home after a six-week assignment on the road, taking pictures for a feature story with the San Francisco News on the plight of migrant farm workers in California. She passed by a crude sign pointing to a pea-pickers farm. She was tired and continued down the highway. Twenty miles later, she did a U-turn and drove to that migrant farm camp. She approached a lean-to tent and came upon a hungry and desperate woman, as if she was drawn by a magnet. She took six pictures and left. She didn’t get the woman’s name; only that this woman was 32, had seven kids and her husband had died of tuberculosis a few months previous. She and her family lived off of frozen peas left from a devastating frost.

When Dorothy developed this picture, she knew she had the perfect picture. The mother’s face said it all: a rare combination of strength and worry. The photo, when it appeared in the San Francisco paper and news outlets across the country, had an immediate impact. Our government rushed food to the camp and no one died of starvation. The woman was identified by name 40 years later. Today, we’re honoring the sacrifice of mothers like Florence Thompson and all the other people who have contributed to our lives.

The most famous mother of all time, Mary, the mother of Jesus, is celebrated the world over for her loving sacrifice. Her sacrifice gave us Jesus.

Today’s story involves Mary and her four sons. Mark identifies them by name in his gospel: Joseph, James, Judas and Simon (6:3). This reference to Jesus’ brothers proves problematic for Catholics, who embrace the perpetual virginity of Mary. Catholic theology interprets Jesus’ brothers as half-brothers or cousins. I prefer the plain sense reading of the text.

Earlier in Mark’s gospel, Mary and her sons are on a mission to bring Jesus home. Since there’s no mention of Jesus’ father, we presume he has died by this time in Jesus’ public ministry.

Jesus’ popularity has been surging of late, so the house where he is teaching is packed with admirers and detractors. Everybody has an opinion of this controversial teacher. Some regard him as the Messiah sent from God. Others conjecture he must be out of his mind or worse yet, possessed with the devil.
Jesus’ family isn’t immune to such reports. They have come “to restrain him” (Mark 3:21). Restrain is a strong word. The only other place this word appears in Mark’s gospel is when the Roman guards come to arrest Jesus. Since Jesus’ family cannot push their way through the crowd, the message is passed by word of mouth that Jesus’ mother and brothers are standing outside and want a word with him.

Jesus’ response is stunning. “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (3:31). I wonder how his family reacted to this apparent snub. What do you mean, “Who are your mother and brothers?” We are your mother and brothers!

Jesus fixes his gaze on the disciples seated near him: “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother” (3:34-35). One commentator I consulted in studying this passage wrote, almost as an aside, I hope you don’t have to preach this text on Mother’s Day. Oh, great!

Some people use this passage to justify that Jesus was anti-family. When I worked in campus ministry, I tried to help a student named Bob who was told by a cult that such verses prove Jesus wanted people to renounce their families in order to follow him. But the Biblical record argues otherwise. Jesus taught his followers to honor father and mother. He talked about their responsibility to provide for aging parents. When he’s asked about grounds for divorce, he brushes the question aside to underscore the purpose of marriage. In a tender moment when Jesus hangs on the cross, he instructs his cousin John to look after his mother (John 19:25-27).

Jesus doesn’t disparage family. He widens the aperture to extend beyond blood relations. Anybody who does God’s will becomes a member of God’s forever family.

Jesus likens his followers to a family. He intends his church to become a family of true believers. Okay, we’re not a model family. All families are flawed; church families included. Yet, Christ seeks to redeem our sin and dysfunction so we can become all that God intends for us.

We want children to know how much God loves them. Psalm 78 declares, “We will tell the next generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, his might and the wonders he has done. He commanded us to teach our children so that the next generation might know them, even the children yet unborn to put their hope in God” (78:4-6).
Every time we baptize a child we’re reminded of our collective responsibility as the family of God. We promise to partner with parents to raise children to love God and follow Jesus Christ. To pull this off, we need parents to step forward in our ministry and this congregation to join parents in this monumental undertaking.

We tend to stratify people by age in our church. Most often, children go to Sunday school and adults to worship. When they reach middle and high school, they become active in Underground. Have we unwittingly segregated the next generation from our wider church?

I delight in watching eager students become confirmed in our church. But it’s distressing to watch these same students drop out years later and become inactive. Too often, when students graduate from high school, they effectively graduate from his church. Faith among the next generation isn’t sticking.

A longitudinal study was conducted by the Fuller Youth Institute some years ago. Observations from this research are included in a book, *Sticky Faith*. The book identifies two key ingredients as to whether faith sticks in the next generation: the value of intergenerational relationships and their involvement in all-church worship. They do not talk about programs geared for children and youth as an ingredient of sticky faith. The greatest single factor of faith that sticks is whether mature believers are pouring into the lives of younger people. If children and youth mingle and worship only with their peers, they are less inclined to participate in intergenerational worship later in life. When we isolate students and children from the wider church, we deprive them of the opportunity to see Christians in action.

Our chief job as a church is to equip parents to become primary Christian educators. If parents spend 936 weeks with their children between birth and high school graduation and our church invests no more 936 hours in these same kids, it only stands to reason that the greatest single influence on children will be their parents.

We’re shifting to two worship services this summer, with a breakfast in-between. Let’s be clear about why we are making this change. If worship for all ages is vital in making faith stick, we want to arrange it so that all ages can worship together. Older children and youth will worship with us for the full hour. Younger school age children will be with us for half the hour and then go to Sunday school.
We're asking the most out of the 8:00 service, since we are asking you to shift by a full hour. We’re confident you will support us in this change since you are already committed to intergenerational ministry through our youth choir.

Staff members conducted several focus groups with younger parents about obstacles in bringing their children to worship. The most frequent concern voiced among young parents is whether their children will be disruptive to other adults.

I like the sanctuary cold (so you won’t fall asleep) and quiet (so you can pay attention). But perhaps I’ve unwittingly communicated that kids don’t belong here. Squirmy kids don’t bother me. Okay, crying babies can take me out, but I enjoy kids in worship. You know why? They bring spontaneity and levity to worship.

I sat with our grandson Luke in worship one Sunday two years ago. He was three at the time. David was leading us in prayer and invited us to enter a time of quiet reflective prayer. I recall Luke asking, loud enough for others to hear, “Are we done yet? Can we go home now?” Like I said, kids bring spontaneity and levity to worship.

Mark tells a story about parents bringing their children to Jesus. His disciples reprimand these parents for doing so, telling them Jesus has more pressing adult stuff to do. Jesus says, “Let the little children come to me; do not hinder them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever doesn’t receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it” (10:13-16).

We want to leverage this community of believers in growing a new generation of believers. Some churches are predominantly old. New churches appeal primarily to the young. We happen to be an intergenerational church. We want to leverage this community of all ages in raising the next generation of believers. We need more people willing to invest in children. We need your prayers as we seek what God is calling us to do in the future.

Okay, so not every parent in Northern Virginia goes to bed at night thinking about their children’s relationship with God. But parents go to bed all over this area worried about the well-being of their children. Will
they find their way in the world? Will they find meaning and purpose? And yes, will they be happy? If parents could see a correlation between their children’s well-being and faith, they would flock to our church.

I regularly tell children that God has big plans for them. I particularly enjoy telling older elementary kids these words. I delight in their reaction. You can almost see them grow in stature. They want to be used by God and fulfill the purposes God has for them.

The prophet Jeremiah says it best, “I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not to harm you, plans to give a future filled with hope” (Jeremiah 29:11-12).