

Family Dynamics

Mark 6:1-13

July 8, 2012 Rev. Adrienne Carr
SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The beloved New England poet, Robert Frost could write memorable poetry. We may not recall all the verses to his most famous works, but I suspect we could all quote a line or two from our favorites. Do you recall:

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood and I, I chose the one less traveled by and it has made all the difference.”

“Whose woods these are I do not know..”

“Something there is that doesn't like a wall..”

“When I see birches bend to left and right across the line of straighter darker trees, I like to think some boy's been swinging them.”

Frost is as much a part of our New England landscape as the mountains or the birches or the stone walls. But he was not only a brilliant poet who captured the musings in our minds and the yearnings in our hearts; he was also a certified Yankee curmudgeon who told it like it is.

For instance, he said:

“A jury consists of twelve persons chosen to decide who has the better lawyer.”

And he commented:

“You don't have to deserve your mother's love. You have to deserve your father's. He's more particular.”

And one line that has stuck with me for years:

“Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.”

When I read today's passage from scripture, the words prodded me into thoughts on family and what it means in all its manifestations. And I found new life in this familiar passage that, I believe, has relevance for us here and now.

As you may know, the background to this incident is that Jesus left Nazareth, and went to hear John the Baptist. He slipped into the water to be baptized and emerged with a divine mandate. He went, or was compelled to go into the wilderness to pray and reflect on the miracle of his awakening into his truth and power. He returned and prepared to begin his ministry by calling disciples to follow him. Making his home in Capernaum, Jesus began to teach and to heal. Word got around and crowds sought him out to hear his words and find healing of various afflictions.

Having traveled around Galilee, Jesus turned toward his home town, Nazareth, preceded by tales of his successful ministry in those other areas of Galilee. What did he expect upon arrival? Certainly, he looked forward to the reunion with his family and telling them all that had come about since he left to see John. He, perhaps, had friends and neighbors who were sick or blind and wanted to heal them. He yearned to invite the whole town to listen to the Good News of God's love for all, particularly for the poor and weak.

What he found was an aching disappointment. The Nazareth community; including his family members, all specifically named, rejected him. It would appear that the Frost words are not universally true. I suspect that if he had returned defeated by life or ill or hungry, there would have been no doubt that he would have been welcomed back into his family and the community. What might be universally true is that a native daughter or son who has achieved some prominence is not always welcomed home with joy or affection. Arising from Jealousy or a sense of inferiority, family and community are unable to accept the returnee. The family and community to which Jesus returned could not believe in the power one of their own; one with the same background, limited education and modest place in the community structure; one who had suddenly become known for compelling teaching skills, charismatic leadership and miraculous healing powers.

In fairness, there may have been logic in their lack of welcome. In that era when Rome ruled Palestine with an iron fist, the people still clearly remembered the retribution Rome took on people who had participated in an uprising in the city of Sephoris, only four miles from Nazareth. Roman soldiers crushed the uprising and crucified 2000 rebels. Therefore, to the people of Nazareth, anyone who spoke with authority, even if it was only religious authority was a danger to the community. Those who achieved prominence risked having too much attention drawn to them and to their families and friends. The calculated action for those who wanted to survive Rome's wrath was to disavow any connection and keep their heads down. The communal wisdom of Nazareth, therefore, decided that Jesus was not welcome in his home town. Thus is Robert Frost proven wrong.

We do not know how Jesus felt about the rejection but we can appreciate the sentiment behind the words he spoke at a later time when told that his mother and brothers were waiting to speak to him:

"Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." Matt:12:49-50

His meaning was clear. Those who shared his work and the danger associated with it were members of the true family of Jesus.

This was a radical concept of family in a time when people did not stray far from home, marriages were arranged and the trade of a father was passed on to the sons. Sons, in fact, were identified by their father's name. Until he was called Rabbi or Master by his followers, Jesus would have been known as Yeshuah Bar Joseph., 'Jesus Son of Joseph.' This profound re-statement of family that Jesus almost cavalierly uttered, is so critically important to Jesus' message that Matthew, Mark and Luke include both the confrontation in Nazareth and the statement on who are members of his family in their Gospels.

I believe that the people of Nazareth unintentionally did a great service to followers of Christ. His pain at that rejection, not so much of him, but of what he could offer his family and neighbors, was the catalyst that shaped a new definition of family. Because of those fearful people in Nazareth, we are not limited to one manifestation of family. There can be many forms of family from which we gain support, care, love and wisdom. Many of the early Christians were shunned by their families of origin and found in the house churches, the love and care that had been denied them. Devout Christians in the medieval church cut themselves off from family of origin and entered convents and monasteries where they became part of religious communities. Harsh and punitive as they came to be, the Pilgrim Separatists and the Puritans landed on these shores believing that they could be a pure company of the family of Christ.

Yes, Family is the bedrock unit in human society. It was in the time of Jesus. It is now. But family of origin is not always the ultimate definition of the question, 'what is family?' How do we define those various manifestations? I still grieve the loss of Erma Bombeck, homespun philosopher, speaker of wisdom and home-life journalist. She writes a description that touches on all the dynamics of families, no matter how those families are composed:

The family. We were a strange little band of characters trudging through life sharing diseases and toothpaste, coveting one another's desserts, hiding shampoo, borrowing money, locking each other out of our rooms, inflicting pain and kissing to heal it in the same instant, loving, laughing, defending, and trying to figure out the common thread that bound us all together.

“ The common thread that bound us all together. “ Where is this thread found? For me, awareness of the bonds of family grew in my childhood from caravans of cars going off to family picnics and solidified in the death of grandparents and parents. It has been felt at the birth of my children and in all the family weddings and reinforced in the birth of a grandchild. But as grateful as I am for my family; and as bound to it, there are many other dimensions of family that challenge me and give me joy in the strength of those other bonds.

When I arrived here on August 1, 1996, I had no idea that I would find an incomparable gift of you. You are my family. We are all bound together by that common thread. We are all bound together by those words of Jesus: *For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.*"

Yes. We are family. We have disagreements and we move on. We have on-going challenges, not the least of which is finding parking, and we grit our teeth and bear those challenges. Our family has been through so much during the last year and a half, but the common thread has carried us through. We have hurt and we have begun to heal. We have lost and we have gained. We have watched out for one another and laughed some in the midst of fears about the future. Above all, we have been faithful. That faithfulness is the thread that binds us in mutual love and affection. This is our great strength and our assurance that all is well.

In a few weeks we will be welcoming Peter and extending the thread to him and his family. May the bonds that we share be effortlessly intertwined around the Cook family drawing them into all that we are and all that we will be.