

Family Dynamics

Lynette Sparks
Third Presbyterian Church
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Mark 3:20-35

Families are complicated. Without exception, I think. And whether we're willing to acknowledge it or not, even if we resist it with all our being, families are more interdependent than we care to admit. We may think that we can individually function apart from and independent of our family members, even if we live thousands of miles away from them, and even if we've pushed ourselves away for one reason or another. But the more I travel down this adventure of life and ministry, the more that doesn't ring true.

I'll be the first to admit I haven't been exempt from that self-delusion. In my younger adult years, my goal was to be an "independent and self-sufficient woman." It was my mantra. And in many respects, that's not a bad goal – especially for women or anyone who's subject to unspoken societal norms that expect persons of a certain gender or class or race to play a subservient role. A goal of independence and self-sufficiency can promote human agency and dignity for those who might be denied it.

At the same time, to think I could be independent and self-sufficient, without acknowledging the continuing influence of my family on how I did things, both good and bad, was to operate with a huge blind spot. All it takes to reveal that blind spot are those priceless words from your spouse: "You're just like your mother," accompanied by the dramatic eye roll.

You may have noticed that family members tend to take on implicitly assigned roles. While not exclusively or exhaustively true, family systems experts tell us that those roles often correlate with sibling positions. According to Roberta Gilbert,¹ the oldest is often the one that likes to tell others what to do. And the oldest is often the one who's expected to hold it all together. The youngest may be the "free spirit," and let others do things for him or her. Those in the middle may relate one way to older siblings, and another way to younger ones. An only child may prefer being around older people or people in authority. And if you're a twin, well, that's a whole different animal. I should know.

My mom is the second oldest of nine who grew up on a family farm. She took on a lot of household responsibility at a pretty young age. It was serious business. She still works nonstop, even though she's well into retirement.

And my dad is the youngest of six. Because of his mother's illness, he was pretty much raised by his older sisters. So not only was he their baby brother, in some respects he was like their son, too.

But when Dad stepped out of his usual baby brother/youngest child role, asserted his own independence and did things his own way – (with some spunk and orneriness, I might add) - well, you can imagine that he encountered resistance. His older siblings labeled him the family rebel. Whether or not their reactions were conscious or intentional, as he began to function outside of his expected role, friction ensued. And many of the family dynamics I remember with Dad's side of the family revolved around them renegotiating those roles to a new and satisfactory equilibrium. It took years, by the way, as these things often do.

¹ Roberta Gilbert, *Extraordinary Relationships: A New Way of Thinking about Human Interactions*, 85-88.

And family systems practitioners also tell us that even when someone in the family moves from a less healthy way of being to a more healthy way of being, the person who always took the reins or played the savior is no longer needed in the same way. That's unsettling.

It also happens in societies. Witness any civil rights or social justice movement in history. Not everybody welcomes it with open arms. It jeopardizes the status of those who've been comfortable with the way things are. And we resist – sometimes consciously, and sometimes we're not fully aware of our own resistance. It's the power of a system that's difficult for anyone to truly understand; but most assuredly it is real. It operates as if it's a zero sum game – if some group advances, someone else must lose.

It gives us one lens to think about what's happening in today's Gospel lesson. Leading up to this episode, Jesus' deeds were sowing seeds of discontent. He performed exorcisms; he got demons to obey him. He healed people with leprosy; made a paralyzed man walk again; healed a man's withered hand.

And he had the audacity to pronounce forgiveness of sins – as if he were God or something. He ignored Sabbath rules. Demon-possessed people kept on coming back to him. And the evil spirits kept falling down before him.

Even though you'd think all of Jesus' acts of healing would make everybody happy, systems don't work that way – at least not right away. Somebody's position is threatened. Even as crowds of broken and wounded people kept coming to Jesus to be healed, resistance grew. Hostility grew. Conflict grew. Whatever societal and family stability had been there before Jesus began his public ministry had now been upended. He'd stepped out outside of the accepted behavioral norms. Disequilibrium. Dis-ease.

His family wanted things to go back to the way they were. They tried to stage what we might call a "family intervention." They thought they were doing what was best.

And some of the religious authorities also wanted things to go back to the way they were. They tried to stage their own intervention, too. Should we be surprised that they wanted to protect the religious institution for which they were responsible? They thought they were doing God's will. If people keep following Jesus, they're going to start ignoring accepted religious norms that they believed reflected that. You see the problem they have...

So how do you push back against that? You need to somehow explain what Jesus is doing in a way that makes sense. And the explanation that made sense in first century ancient Mediterranean culture was magic. Black magic. The sinister kind. Satanic powers.

That's not language we use much around here. We don't believe in demon possession in the same way that our first century forebears did. And yet, let's not lose the intensity of what Jesus struggled against. We see the intensity of that struggle, writes Thomas Troeger, in Mark's "*gutsy image of tying up a strong man and plundering his house.*" Troeger continues, "*When someone deliberately tangles with the demonic powers of this world, it can look like madness. I think of women and men who have bravely tried to eradicate prejudice and oppression. They are commonly greeted with the assumption of most people that the established powers will never be displaced, and those who try must be "out of their minds" to make what is surely a futile effort.*"²

It should not be new news that our Rochester community is in the midst of that kind of intense struggle – the struggle against generational and concentrated poverty, the struggle against defacto institutionalized segregation, the struggle against overt and unconscious prejudice, the struggle against educational inequities. If those are not demonic powers, I don't know what are.

² *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 103.

I had a conversation a while back with a really good friend – fellow clergy, in fact - about our *Great Schools for All* work to de-concentrate poverty in our schools. And when we talked about the implications of what it would take for that to actually happen, she in essence said to me, “you’re wasting your time.” This was clergy that said this to me.

I think of my beloved home state of South Dakota. For as much as I like to think the people from whence I came were pretty egalitarian, my brother recently reminded me that our home state’s shame is the segregation of Native Americans. If that’s not a demonic power, I don’t know what is.

Some of our families are in the midst of that kind of intense struggle – the struggle against the powers of addiction, of domestic abuse, of broken relationships. I don’t think there’s a family on earth that isn’t dysfunctional in some way or another.

And if we take Mark’s Gospel to heart, we ought to consider the possibility that wherever that kind of power is being resisted, in those life and death matters, Christ is in the middle of that epic struggle.

Today is Outreach Recognition Sunday at Third Church. We feed some of the hungry people in Rochester. We provide shelter for some homeless people. We help educate some children who arrive at school every morning with the deck of poverty stacked against them. Those are all good things to do. They make the world a little better place. They relieve some suffering. They even provide glimmers of hope where otherwise there might be none. And ultimately we do them because Jesus has called us into that ministry, even as he called Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew and Philip, and Bartholomew, and Matthew and Thomas and James and Thaddaeus, and Simon, and even Judas. He’s called us all...

And more and more, we are being awakened to Christ’s call to work for systemic change – change that will address the injustices that hold people captive. It’s madness, Troeger writes poetically – divine madness – “the madness of conceiving what no one else can see, then acting and believing so it will come to be...the force of faith in action seems madness to each age and often the reaction is fear disguised as rage. Yet earth needs heaven’s madness to seize with grace and bind the guilt, the hurt, the sadness, the fear and hate that blind...”³

Jesus’ own family came to restrain him from his madness, remember? They came to take him away, to settle him down, to talk sense into him. And when he received word from the huddled crowd that his biological family had come asking for him, he used the occasion to reconceive and expand who he considered his family. “Who are my family? All who do the will of God are my brother, my sister, my mother.”

This is good news for all of us who come from one form of human family dysfunction or another – a beacon of hope that we are not confined to the limitations and complications of our human families, but can be enfolded into Christ’s family.

At Living Waters Wednesday this past week, I quoted some of Frederick Buechner’s thoughts on the human family that seem to me to illuminate what it means to be included in Jesus’ family: It means “*we come from the same beginning and are headed toward the same conclusion, [and] in the meantime our lives are elaborately and inescapably linked...It’s not so much that things happen in a family as it is that the family is the things that happen in it...It is within the fragile, yet formidable walls of family that you learn, or do not learn, what...family means.*”⁴

³ *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, 103.

⁴ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/content/family>

In a few moments we will celebrate the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, where Jesus sets the family table. It's at Jesus' family table where we remember the intensity of Christ's struggle against the cosmic powers of evil. It's at Jesus' family table where we learn what it means to belong to Christ and to be reconciled one with another. And it's at Jesus' family table that we proclaim the power of Christ's reign for the renewal of the world in justice and in peace.

Amen.