

June 10, 2012 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

### Who Is My Family?

Mark 3:31-35      *“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”*

We just sang a lovely hymn inspired by today's gospel reading. The text was written by the New Zealand hymn writer Shirley Erena Murray. She also wrote “Come and Find the Quiet Center,” which we use often as an invitation to silence on retreats.

However, I wanted to also note that the hymn text is a departure from Jesus' actual words in Mark's story. The hymn says: “Who is my mother? Who is my brother? All those who gather 'round Jesus Christ.” In the story, when told that his mother and brothers are outside the house asking for him, Jesus says: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

The distinction is important. Jesus indeed looks at those gathered around him, and says, Here is my family. Yet, he goes on to speak of all who do God's will as his family. So, as a follower of Jesus, my brothers and sisters are those gathered with me around Jesus. However, all who seek to discern and to do God's will are also my family, whether or not they are gathered around Jesus.

It comes down to this, I think. Jesus did not come to teach Christianity, a religion with himself at the center. Jesus came to teach and embody a way of life characterized by wisdom, healing, compassion, non-violence, forgiveness, the confronting of hypocrisy and injustice, all summed up in loving God and our neighbor as we love ourselves. To this we must add these days, love of the good, yet endangered, creation. To be a follower of Jesus is to gather round him, listen to his teachings, draw strength, guidance, and power from his life and spirit, and put into practice what we are learning. And when we are doing that, we will find others, gathered round Jesus or not, who are engaged in the same life and truth. Our true family is all who seek to live as God created us to live.

Let me share two stories. I think I have shared them before, but they seem appropriate for today. Both come when Kaye and I were in southern India with other Disciples of Christ and United Church of Christ folks. We were visiting ministries sponsored and supported by the ecumenical Church of South India, which in turn we

support through our outreach giving.

In the city of Madurai, we stayed at the Tamilnadu Theological Seminary. The seminary was involved in many projects to serve the people of the city and nearby villages. There are no attempts to make Hindus into Christians, merely the desire to help the poorest of India's people. In short, to do the will of God.

One afternoon we rode into the countryside to see a soil enrichment project. Some of the villagers, including children, proudly showed us the trays of black soil, filled with earthworms doing their work. We were treated to a delicious rice pudding served in a leaf. When we arrived at the site, the seminary student who accompanied us held small bowls of colored paint with which he offered to place on our foreheads a *tilak*, the dot or mark one sees worn by Hindu people. It is a religious mark, but also a sign of hospitality. Receiving it is honoring the culture. In front of me was a minister who, when offered the *tilak*, shook his head sharply in refusal. Whatever his reasons, it was a graceless rejection of hospitality. As I stepped up to receive the *tilak*, eager to make amends for my colleague's insensitivity, the seminary student spoke a soft "thank you." The offering of the *tilak* and the receiving of it comprised an event of God's will, small, yes, but significant.

The second event had occurred earlier, when we arrived at the first village. We piled out of the vans and were met by the whole village, it seemed. Garlands and shawls were placed around our necks and shoulders, such as the shawl that is on our communion table. We were offered Indian tea. Plastic chairs had been assembled for us to sit in honor and comfort for the welcome ceremony. Then we mingled with the villagers, enjoying a sense of friendship with these very poor people who smiled so brightly and warmly.

After our visit, we learned something that made the experience even more amazing. There was a milk cow project in that village. A bank would loan a cow to a woman, which would benefit the woman and her family, and also enable repayment to the bank through the sale of milk. It apparently was a successful project. Somehow a rumor had started in the village that we represented the bank, and were coming to repossess the cows! Even with that terrible misunderstanding of the situation, the village showed us such hospitality! They must have been so relieved to find out we were not coming to get their cows, and we were even more deeply moved by the welcome of these poor people. I wondered again why it is that we find the purest joy and generosity in those who have little or nothing materially. They had shown us what

the will of God looks like!

My family is everyone who does the will of God, says Jesus. My brothers and sisters are all who seek to live the way God created us to live. It is not ultimately about religion, but life. It is not about making people religious. It is about religious practice helping us become fully human. And it can no longer be about my religion is better than your religion. It must be about this: Is our religion, or spiritual tradition and practice, leading and empowering us to live in ways that enhance the life of this, God's world? I think these days it can no longer be about bringing people into the church or making them adherents of a particular religion. It must be about people finding a community with one another that fosters and nourishes life that is just, peaceful, generous, joyful, and lived with mindfulness and care of the earth. The problem, I don't think, is religion itself, but what we do with it. If we see religion as an end in itself, it will make us closed in on ourselves, fearful, defensive, and in the end suffocate us. Yet we need a spiritual community that helps us grow into our full humanity, discern the call and gifts of God in our lives, and opens us to others with whom we share the seeking and doing of God's will for life.

I have said fairly often that there is an important distinction between religion and spirituality. I didn't make this up! It is at least as old as Jesus, and even older. We are seeing it again today, that many people consider themselves "spiritual" but want nothing to do with "religion." They have found institutional religion to be harmful or simply useless and out of touch with life. I think we need to welcome, embrace, and learn from this. In my lifetime of taking religion and spirituality pretty seriously, I have increasingly discovered how important it is that religious life and practice be always directed toward our living more fully as human beings. I think if we read Jesus' life and teachings as we find them in the gospels, we will see that this is pretty much what Jesus was about—the kind of life we live, not the perpetuation of religion.

Religion is very important. Religious practice is very important. Being part of a community where we together work with spiritual practices that center and ground us is very important. Given the insanity of our culture and world these days, I don't know how one can find and stay in touch with one's true humanity without daily spiritual practice and a community that takes seriously the spiritual life. In a community of practice we find our true family, our deepest kinship with one another in the love that comes from God who created us. And in this sense, our family IS those who gather around Jesus. Yet, Jesus, around whom we gather, then points us to the wider family

of all of those near and far who long for, seek, and strive to live in the ways we were meant and made to live. The need for this true family has never been greater.

I was on retreat week before last at the Sisters of Loretto Motherhouse, near Bardstown, Kentucky. Loretto is a community of Catholic sisters founded in Kentucky in 1812. Kaye and I have been going there on retreat and for conversations with that community for about thirty years. Kaye has been a Co-Member of the Loretto Community for thirty years, I for thirteen years. It has been a place and a community that has helped me ground, deepen, and “grow” my life as a person of faith.

While at Loretto, one morning I drove ten miles through the countryside to visit the Abbey of Gethsemani, a Cistercian, or Trappist, monastery established there in 1848. I took my first ever three-day silent retreat at Gethsemani in 1976. I had decided to go there in part because of Thomas Merton's life and writings, and Gethsemani had been Merton's community. More urgent, however, was the fact that I was into my first pastorate out of seminary, and already burning myself out. I figured it was time I really learned what prayer and the spiritual life were really about!

My visit to the abbey two weeks ago was a return to what felt like the birth place, or re-birth place, of my spirit, my soul. I spent the whole morning filled with a deep gratitude for that place and that community, and the Loretto community, both of which had played such a crucial role in my life as a human being. Both communities also showed me that gathering around Jesus in a deep way of spiritual learning and practice reveals to us the Jesus who tells us that our true family consists of all who seek God's will. Thomas Merton, after all, died in 1968 of an accidental electrical shock in his guest quarters where he was attending a conference of Christian and non-Christian Asian monks in suburban Bangkok. And it was a Loretto that I was first introduced to the, for me, life-changing writings of the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh.

As I drove back to Loretto, I thought about our community here with the same deep gratitude. The reason I am here is because I recognize my need to be part of a spiritual community that practices seeking and doing God's presence, love, and will in our lives. Sometimes when people ask me why I came to the Church of the Covenant, I say because it is coming to my true home. Our community came into being to offer the kind of life I have been talking about. We are religious in that we embrace worship, scriptures, and practices that in the Christian tradition. We gather round Jesus. Our emphasis has been on the spiritual life, the life lived in the world with awareness of our relationship with God and the world as God's creation. We have the understanding

that our true family is composed of those here and elsewhere who sincerely seek and desire to live as true human beings, in the ways we were created to live. That is our truest and deepest belonging to one another, for it is grounded in God, the Source of Life, and God's love for us and the world.