

“Family Stuff”
Mark 3:19b-35
June 10, 2018
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings

I'm always a little bit nervous when someone quotes one of my sermons back to me. Especially when it's from a long time ago. “Remember about five years ago when you said . . . ?” Uh oh. What did I say? Did I really say that? Did I really mean that? How did I get myself into trouble now? That happened this last week, when someone said, “I remember once in a sermon when you said, “Every family has *stuff*.”” And actually I remember this one. It was a discovery I made about my best friend, Dave. When I was in high school, I was very envious of Dave and his family. Both of us were from families of four children, three boys and then a girl. But Dave's parents were still together, mine were divorced. Dave's brothers all seemed to get along, mine had trouble. Dave was a church-going Eagle Scout, I definitely wasn't. But as we got to be closer friends, I began to realize that as wonderful as Dave's family was, they still had *stuff*. They still had issues. The brothers didn't always get along either with each other or their parents. They even had fights sometimes. That's when I realized that every family has stuff. Issues, skeletons in the closet, secrets hidden from the outside world. My family had stuff, so did Dave's. It's one of the truths that I brought to the ministry especially when I talk to couples about to be married. Most times they want to focus on one another and not think about the families they grew up with. But everybody carries baggage from their family of origin, and in a healthy marriage, those things need to be talked about. Every family has stuff. Even yours. No family is perfect. We all have unresolved issues, unspoken expectations, or maybe even the crazy cousin that no one talks about. Your family has those too, right? Or maybe you're the crazy cousin the rest of the family tries to keep secret.

Every family has stuff, right? Except his. He was perfect, sinless, so Jesus family must have been perfect too, right? But this passage tells us differently. Jesus family had stuff too. Imagine what it must have been like. From what we can tell, Jesus begins his public ministry when he is about 30 years

old. We don't know much about his history before that. He grew up in Nazareth, his father Joseph was a carpenter, so we assume that he was trained as a carpenter also. That's where traditions diverge. Some church traditions say that Jesus was an only child and that Mary was not only virgin when Jesus was born, but she was perpetually virgin and so had no other children. According to Orthodox tradition, the brothers mentioned in this passage were actually step-brothers, Joseph's from a previous marriage. In this tradition Joseph was significantly older than Mary when Jesus was born, and so by the time Jesus begins his ministry years later, Joseph has died. According to some traditions, these brothers are actually cousins and Mary and Joseph live together with only the one child, Jesus. I can already tell that these families would have stuff to deal with. A mother who is perpetually virgin? Older brothers and sisters who have a younger brother who is perfect? That's plenty of stuff to deal with. In most Protestant traditions, we believe that the brothers mentioned here were true children of Mary and Joseph, born after Jesus. Perhaps Jesus doesn't begin his ministry until age 30 because it is true that Joseph has died and as the oldest child it is his responsibility to support the family. Perhaps he waits until his brothers are old enough to care for their mother before he leaves to preach and teach and heal. In any case, at the beginning of our passage today, Mark says that Jesus came home. He came back to Nazareth and his family was there to greet him. And they want to take him back home because they think he is crazy. This family has stuff. Even with the Son of God, this family has stuff. Every family has stuff. Even us. Even this family, our church. Every family has stuff. We are a family and we have baggage. We have times when we have disappointed each other. We have times when we have fought. We have times when we have hurt each other. It's sort of in the nature of families.

So why does God put us in families, in congregations, in marriages, in relationships? Because that is where we learn. We learn to get along, we learn to forgive, and eventually, it is on each other that we learn to love and so grow up into the people that God created us to be. Some of you may have seen the column this week in the New York Times by David Brooks, who likens our national life to a marriage,

and that we should take some of the lessons we learn in marriage into the public square for how we can learn to not only get along but to appreciate each other. Brooks says:

As Mike Mason puts it in [“The Mystery of Marriage.”](#) “A marriage lives, paradoxically, upon those almost impossible times when it is perfectly clear to the two partners that nothing else but pure sacrificial love can hold them together.” This involves, he writes, “a deliberate choosing of closeness over distance, of companionship over detachment, of relationship over isolation.”

That involves a relentless turning toward each other. John Gottman, who I suppose is the dean of marriage experts, describes relationship as a pattern of bids and volleys. One partner makes a conversational bid: “Look how beautiful the sunset looks!” The other partner can either respond with a toward bid: “Wow. Incredible. Thanks for pointing it out!”; or an against bid: “I was reading the paper, do you mind?”; or a turning-away bid, which would be grunting and not responding at all.

Successful marriages, Gottman finds, have five toward bids for every one of the other kinds. The relationship masters, he told Emily Esfahani Smith in [The Atlantic](#), are the people who are actively scanning the social horizon for things they appreciate about the other person and can say thank you for.¹

Think about your conversations with your spouse or with someone that you love. How do you speak to them? Do you have five “toward bids” for every one of the others? Do you have five appreciative comments for every one time of complaint? Think about your families, your children. Do you have more comments to them that build them up rather than ones that tell them what they should be doing? Do you look for things to say to them to let them know that you appreciate them? What about with the church? It isn't any different is it? Do you look for things and people you appreciate, or things to be critical of? There are plenty of things around here that we need to work on, certainly. But as a family we will want to work on them if we know that we appreciate each other and our church family.

¹ Brooks, David. *New York Times*, June 5, 2018.

Because that's what the church is all about, isn't it? The foundational document for the Presbyterian Church, our constitution says: "The polity of the Presbyterian Church (USA) presupposes the fellowship of women, men and children united in covenant relationship with one another and with God through Jesus Christ. The organization rests on the fellowship and is not designed to work without trust and love."² That's why we have worship *together*. That's why we have *fellowship* picnics. That's why we gather together to say farewell to those we love who have died, to proclaim our *common* faith in the resurrection. We can't do it by ourselves. We can't even do it completely on line or on Facebook. We come together.

Every family has stuff. But it can be positive stuff as well as negative. When Jesus points out who his true family is, he says it is the people who do the will of God. And what's the will of God for each family, each church, each relationship? I hope we all know by this time is to love one another. The families that God gives us is where we get to practice that love.

2 *Book of Order, Presbyterian Church (USA). G-1.0102.*