“Water is Thicker than blood”  
6/7/15  
Mark 3:19b-35  
Trinity Lutheran Church  
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Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace to you and peace from God our Creator and Jesus, our brother. Amen.

My brother Steve and I did not get along growing up, from a period from about 1st grade, to my 1st year of college! For my part, I was a curious, nosey, and sometimes annoying little sister. On his side, Steven was kind of mean. He would play tricks on me, saying something like “Sarah, there’s gullible written on the ceiling!” Or, he’d go the fridge, take out my favorite leftover food from dinner, and lick it so that I could not eat it later. To this day, he answers my phone calls with the greeting, “Hey little dork, what’s up!”

My brother and I grew up on in New London, MN. Our house was right in town, which meant we looked across the street at a lovely pond. From time to time, because you could see the small swimming beach from our picture window, I would go over alone to go swimming at the stretch of sandy swimming beach. Usually there was lifeguard. I didn’t mind daydreaming and playing in the sand or shallows on my own. One day when I was about 10 years old, I was swimming out to the raft and back, and by the time I came back, everyone else who had been on the beach had gone home. Everyone that is, except a group (almost like a gang) of boys, ranging in ages younger to a few years older than me. There were about 6 of them, and just me. No big deal, I thought, and tried to calmly swim to the small swimming dock. But, before I could get there, the group of boys moved there first, and started to throw sand at me. So, I swam back out again, trying to swim to another part of the beach. But again, they cut me off, with stones and mean words. I was stunned, and sad, and scared. I ended up having to swim back to our house, through the weeds and lily pads, abandoning my towel on the beach, walking up the steep bank in the ‘non-swimming area’ of the pond, which was right in front of our house. I arrived to our kitchen, dripping wet and crying. I’m not sure where Mom was at that moment, but it was my big brother Steven who greeted me. Would he make fun of me? I wondered. Or, not believe the story?

I have never seen my brother’s face go so red when I told him the tail, as he quickly took off at a run--out of the house back towards the swimming beach. It’s lucky that those boys were gone, even though there was just one of my brother. That day, I learned that it was true: Despite how we got along most of the time, blood was thicker than water.

Perhaps this tale is not surprising to many of you. Family is one of our highest values. 408 families from Trinity took time this spring to have pictures taken for the new church directory, and even more participated by sending in family photos. It seems more and more common among my peers to have framed family photos as the primary decoration adorning their house walls. And that makes sense in a lot of ways. Among the carpools and baseball games and fights with siblings and potty training—to capture, just for a moment, the ideal, the love that we hope is present in a family--Who wouldn't want that?
In college, I remember taking an ethics class called “War & Peace.” One night I was talking to my dad on the phone about what we were studying. I think it was pacifism and Bonhoeffer, or Just War Theory or the like. And as we spoke (my dad being a pastor) the conversation took on a theological ton, and we were how our faith calls us to live peacefully and do no harm to others, as far as we are able. But then I’ll never forget what Dad said (who had never owned a gun in his life): “But if you threaten my family, I would kill. I would do anything for family.” That always took me aback.

Blood is thicker than water. Family comes first. I think we’d all agree that that is a value we aspire to.

Which is why it’s so disturbing in our gospel for today, when we see Jesus seem to reject his blood kin, calling his disciples (you and me) to something different—challenging even our most cherished values (Family!) or at least the priority we hang them on our wall.

So what’s the story? Jesus, in a very short amount of time, has attracted a lot of attention, as Mark tells it. He’s been forgiving sins, performing exorcisms, doing healing after healing, and teaching with a ‘new kind of authority.’ For this, he as gathered around him a paparazzi-like following, people clamoring just to be near him. There were so many people, he and his disciples had to keep getting in to boats or climbing mountains or today—barricading themselves inside a house just to get one quiet moment.

In all this, Jesus had also attracted the religious authorities. Which makes sense. Wouldn’t we all be wary of someone who came from nowhere and had sudden dramatic mass appeal? That is suspicious. And so, they made the trip all the way from Jerusalem to Capernaum that day, in order to discredit Jesus publically. They call him “Beelzebub.” And that ‘by the Lord of the flies’ he casts out demons. That it is because he is working with Satan that he has the powers to do what he was doing! That is their accusation.

Luckily, Jesus family is also on the scene. Which wasn’t normal—usually Jesus was out and about and not in his hometown. But they are there that day. And as I read this scene I wondered, would they rush to Jesus’ defense? Would they speak out against those authorities for talking about their family member that way?

What really happens: Jesus’ family think he’s flipped his lid! They think he might actually be what the Scribes are saying, namely, crazy. And they come to the scene today not to support Jesus but rather to try to contain him—for his own good, and for the good of the family name, perhaps? I wonder, did they know or forget—that their son, their brother, their cousin—was actually God incarnate?

Because Jesus wouldn’t have it! He wouldn’t be held back. He shot down with pure reason what the religious authorities said, and not even the presence of his family could deter his purpose.

In Marks’ gospel, Jesus had come to confront powers: the powers of Satan, which had held people in its grasp; the powers of hollow religion, which he saw in the Scribes and Pharisees; and finally, Jesus even came to confront the power of kinship ties.
Maybe Jesus knew something: that even the institution of family—alone-- isn’t strong enough to bear all and be all for us, or to bring us into the fullness of life God intends.

As a Pastor, it’s true what William Willimon pointed out recently--that a good bit of pastoral care time is spent with people who are dealing with damage that were done to them in their family. New couples will come to us, stressed out in their relationship already—because each person is bringing their own assumptions of what family is and who should do what. We sit down with spouses whose crumbling marriage has brought them to their knees after 20 years. We speak with parents about the hurt their children are experiencing. There are people in this congregation sitting here, I am certain, who are dealing with the baggage of a childhood with parents who loved you but did not know how properly to show love to you.

For all the value we put on it, a lot of sad things happen in the family. And the question is this: Can the family bear the moral and spiritual weight we are putting upon it? Yes, the power of love can keep a family together, but where does the love get its power in the first place? It comes from God.

And so Jesus says today: *Who are my mother and my brothers?* And looking at those who sat around him, he said, *Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.* Jesus is calling into existence a new level of family: one defined not by DNA or adoption records, but by discipleship. Family, for Jesus, is those who gather together, seeking to know God, and do God’s will. Blood, thicker than water? Actually, according to Jesus, it’s the other way around.

Baptismal waters claim us with an identity that is stronger than one penned on any birth certificate. We are sealed by the Holy Spirit, marked with Cross of Christ forever. We are called beloved child of God, affirmed, included. Invited to be a part of multi-generational, cross-political, interdenominational, world-wide family. A family that crosses boundaries of countries, stretches back thousands of years in time, and will into the future just as far. “Welcome into the body of Christ who has a mission to share—working and living together—the baptized people of God.” These are the words we say with the water that binds us and claims us.

Jesus words in the gospel reading today are both grace and challenge. The grace is this: that we are invited to sit at the feet of Jesus, and hear him include us in his family. That it is not by a certain bloodline, or a religious degree that we are made worthy. But rather, it is simply by being near Jesus, following him, seeking to know him and do his will. God says, that’s it—you’re in! So whether or not your nuclear family is “instagram” perfect or the perfect formula for a life long journey in therapy: here, church—Trinity—is an extended family for you. Supporting you and stretching you in ways you wouldn’t experience otherwise.

Where else can you gather with people 70 years younger, 70 years older, and everywhere in between? Where else can you gather with people whose vote on any given ballet essentially cancels yours out or at least renders it neutral. Where else can you be in regular relationship with people whose life experience and work experience is so different from yours if they wrote it down, you’d think it a fictional novella?
It may be an odd mix of people sometimes, but no matter. Church isn’t thin sand we’re dealing with. If it was, we could make a bunch of pretty castles and they would be swept away by the tide of one week. On the contrary, the community called the church at its best is enriched, and diverse soil— and it is exactly its diversity which makes it (us) together, the body of Christ, here to bless the world in ways before unimaginable. Jesus word’s grace include us in his family today.

Jesus words also challenge us. We are challenged to look around and ask, “Who is not at the table? Is there somebody missing from this menagerie that makes up the family of God called Trinity? And, is it time for us, for you—to invite them to a family dinner?

For here is a community where all are fed with forgiveness, nourished by acceptance and grace, and sent out to live out our baptismal identities in a world who needs our compassion and care.

How can we keep that to ourselves?

Water is thicker than blood. Thanks be to God in Christ for all families, for this unique one gathered here today because of Christ. May God bless us with vision to live into this sacred identity, ever expanding our circle of welcome. Amen.