

November 20, 2011

The National Presbyterian Church

## Jesus' Brothers: Family Ties

2 Timothy 1:3-7; John 7:1-10

Dr. David Renwick

*Let us pray. Almighty God, remember us with Your love. Embrace us in Your mercy. Speak to us a word as if we were the only child in your sight – a word that encourages us and comforts us and challenges us to be the people you call us to be. Through Jesus Christ your Son, our Lord and Savior, Amen.*

In our sermons through the fall we have been looking together at the story of Jesus as we find it recorded for us in the gospel according to Saint John, one of four different accounts of Jesus' ministry that we have in the pages of scripture. Each of these accounts is slightly different. They are like paintings of Jesus by different grand masters, each giving to us some facet of his life, some facet of his character that the others don't quite reach into, because no one picture can encapsulate him. And so we look at his life from different angles. And as John tells us Jesus' story, one of the angles that he picks up on is the angle of the relationships that Jesus establishes with all kinds of different people. There are people who appear in John's gospel and whose lives connect and intersect with Jesus' life who do not appear in other gospels. Some overlap but many of them are different. But each of them in their own way intersects with and is changed by this meeting with Jesus.

- Some of them are religious, some are non-religious
- some are educated, some are uneducated
- some are powerful, some are powerless
- some successful, some unsuccessful
- some male, some female
- some young, some old
- some hopeful, some hopeless.

All of them wanting Jesus' blessing, to find meaning and purpose in life – in the physical life, in the spiritual life, both of these blended together. Jesus is concerned with both of them.

But their response to him is different in each case. There are some who come to Jesus seeking his blessing and who are willing to follow him wherever

he goes (in the gospels we find Jesus saying ‘follow me’ over eighty times):  
“Follow me!” Jesus is in the lead, and we follow.

But there are others who when they come to Jesus know that he could be the source of their blessing, but instead of following Jesus they, in effect, say to Jesus, “*You follow me!* I have my own plans for my life. I have my own purposes. Now if you can help me out with my plans and purposes please come with me.” As if you were slipping Jesus into your hip pocket. As if you were attaching Jesus’ star to your wagon. You’re leading the way and Jesus is ‘there for you’ (I often hear that phrase – ‘Jesus is there for me’ . . . and he is: but the trick is to flip it around and ask ‘Are we there for Jesus? That is, “Who is in the lead? Is he or is he not?” This is what he wants to be. To paraphrase Jesus (Jn 6:53), he says to one group, hungry and thirsting for something after he feeds a crowd of 5,000: “Unless you eat me up fully, hook line and sinker, until I am the one who nourishes you and changes you and makes you grow, you can have none of me. It won’t work if you just hitch me to your wagon.” So we have to ask ourselves “Where are we, am I in all of these relationships?” And this is what we’ve been doing as we’ve looked at the first six chapters of John’s gospel.

We come this morning to the seventh chapter of John’s gospel and Jesus interacts with yet another group of people – a group of people he has known for a long time. This time it is his own brothers; his own family. We are introduced to them (many of you perhaps never knew he had a family: well, it’s here in scripture!) in two different passages. We don’t know how many are in the family, but his brothers interact with Jesus in our particular passage in John Chapter 7 as well as in the verses we read in Mark Chapter 3. And what we discover immediately in both of these interactions is that there is tension in the Holy Family. There is tension in what should be ‘paradise’. Sibling rivalry in the midst of even Jesus’ family ties.

That is, Jesus’ brothers are profoundly skeptical of their brother’s call and ministry and mission. In fact in Mark Chapter 3, Mary, his mother, is in the story with his brothers. Jesus is in the middle of a crowd, and some of them think that Jesus has gone mad, and the family buys into this, and they go after Jesus to rescue him from whatever is happening in his life. He’s lost it they say. And they want to take him home: “Just be the boy you always were, from Nazareth, none of this Messiah stuff at all. You have delusions of grandeur. Come on home with us.”

And then in our main passage John Chapter 7 the brothers try to call Jesus’ bluff, as if to say “So you think you’re great, if you’re really that great, you would show your greatness not just in our own back yard of Galilee. This is a backwater, Galilee. You need to go to the big city. If you’re great in the big city, you will truly be great. You need to go to Jerusalem. (It’s like saying ‘you need to go to Los Angeles, you need to

be in Hollywood, you need to go to New York, you need to be on Broadway.'). If you're going to really be great hit the big time in the big places. But here in Galilee you're just a big fish in a small pool. BUT, now's the time. There's a festival in Jerusalem, go. Go show yourself. Reveal yourself to the people. To which Jesus replies "No, not yet. The time is not right. I'm not going now. At least I'm not going with you now." Though, as a faithful Jew, and John adds this as an aside, as a faithful Jewish observer because there is a festival (and this is one of the three great festivals in Judaism), Jesus does go, 'incognito,' as an individual faithful person. The festival, by the way, is the festival of booths. And the festival of booths is probably as close to our Thanksgiving holiday (that we are celebrating this week) as you could imagine.

So here is this tension in Jesus' family. And it may come as a surprise to us – that even in this supposed paradise, even in the Holy Family there is tension.

But, on the other hand, if you know your scripture it may not come as a surprise at all! There are actually very few happy families in the whole of the Bible. You have to look hard to find these happy families.

Look up Second Timothy (1) and you find Timothy, one of the early Christian leaders, who seems to have a happy family. He learns his faith we are told from his mother Eunice and his grandmother Lois and they seem to be happy . . . except for the fact there are no men in this story: we don't know where the husbands have gone. But they seem to be happy as far as they go. And then you can find another happy family in First Chronicles 25: 4. You have to dig hard to find this. There's an obscure family – the children of Heman. He has 14 sons and three daughters and they are the musicians for the about-to-be-built temple. And apparently they are all getting along together making gorgeous music for God . . . happily!

But, then . . . when you look at the rest of the scripture, at the families with whom God is interacting, who form a substantial part of the Biblical story, especially in the opening book of Genesis, there is hardly a functional family among them. Every single one of them seems to be dysfunctional in some kind of a way.

- It starts with Adam and Eve right back in the beginning in the first few chapters of Genesis. So Adam and Eve eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and God comes along, and what happens next? The blame game begins: "It wasn't me, it was her." "It wasn't me it was the Devil. The Devil made me do it."
- You then move on a chapter and then you come to their children – the story of Cain and Able in Genesis 4, where Cain is so jealous of Able

that he kills him; he rises up and he kills his own brother. We may at times wish to do such things as this but they actually do it.

- And then we think of Abraham. Forefather of three different great world religions: the Jewish people, the Christian people and the Muslim people. A man whose name has been more prominent in the last 20 years with the rise of Islam than ever before. But when you look at the details of Abraham's life, along with the good things there are some rather tricky things. So we find Abraham in Genesis chapter 20 in the presence of a powerful king, a powerful leader, and this powerful leader has eyes for Abraham's wife Sarah. And what does Abraham say at that point? he doesn't say 'Back off.' he says 'Ah, well, she's actually not really my wife, she's my sister.'" This is not exactly something I recommend that you say at such a time as this
- Or there is Abraham's grandson, Jacob, in Genesis 27 and 28 who deceives his father and then cheats his brother out of his inheritance.
- And Joseph, one of Jacob's 12 sons in Genesis 37 who is sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt.
- And then one more. We go to King David, the greatest king of Israel, after whom the Messiah-King is to be patterned: a king like King David . . . except for the fact there are some serious flaws in David's life. He commits adultery with Bath Sheba. And then his family is all torn apart in turmoil and his son Absalom leads a rebellion against his father. And in that rebellion Absalom dies, and David's grief knows no bounds.

This is not a pretty picture and it goes through the whole story of the Bible up to Jesus' family itself. So that what we discover is that the Bible in no way sugar coats or trivializes the difficulties of family life. And for some of us at least this I think is actually *really good news!*. . . especially at festival times. Especially at this time of Thanksgiving when some of us are going to be with family.

→Some of us are happy about this. This is wonderful – a time of reunion and we are just looking forward to it immensely.

→Others of us may be going to be alone, and we're really sad at this time. We wish we were with others.

→ And then there's a third group. The third group are those who are going to be with family and who wish they were alone!!

. . . because they know that the tension which is just beneath the surface is either going to just stay beneath the surface (because everybody's working overtime to keep it down) or it's going to bubble up and within a few hours all those things that have been there in the past, they will come up to the surface and what appears to be a wonderful time will be spoiled by that.

So what are we going to do in this situation, if our families are like the biblical families, in which family life is by no means always portrayed as something remarkably wonderful?

And even if our families are fine, what are we going to do with those other kinds of family systems that we belong to: whether at work, or in the church, or in voluntary organizations we're in . . . which are not working quite as wonderfully as we would like them to work?

Well this morning I would like to share with you three quick little pieces of advice. The first is what I call secular: it comes from the world of math. This is a freebee. I'm just going to add it on at the beginning, no charge. The second is Biblical. It's really to reiterate what I've just shared, the story of the Bible. And the third is from Jesus himself in our passage in John Chapter 7.

1. SECULAR ADVICE: GROUPS OF PEOPLE ARE COMPLICATED: DO THE MATH! So here's the secular advice and it's this. Just to let you know that any group of four or more people is complicated. It really doesn't matter who's in the group. And you can see this when you count up all the relations involved (you can check this by Googling 'combinations; or at <http://www.calculatorsoup.com/calculators/discretemathematics/combinations.php>)

The details aren't important but the basic issue is. So here's the deal.

- You've got two people. And how many relationships? You have one relationship, not counting your individual relationship with yourself): for example: me and my wife. One relationship.
- You add a child (now three people) and how many relationships do you have? You have (1) me, my wife and my child; (2) me and my wife; (3) me and my child; (4) my wife and my child. Do you see? We've speedily gone from one to four.
- So then you add one more child into the picture (four in the family) and what happens? You move all of a sudden with four people up to eleven relationships. This is beginning to take off at this stage. You have ten relationships: (1) me, my wife, child one, child two. (2) My wife, child one, child two. (3) Me, child one, child two . . . well you get the picture it adds up pretty quickly.
- Then you go to five relationships or six relationships. If you have six people in the household, all of a sudden, and you can check this out, it goes up to 57 relationships of one kind or another. It's an exponential increase in the relationships.

So, and this is the point, *even if* everybody is nice, it gets complicated.

So the best piece of advice I was ever given as a parent as the father of three children (so there were five in the household), the best piece of advice I was ever given was "get rid of one of the children as soon as you can, doesn't matter

which one” And you know there’s some truth in it! You think “Well it’s just this one child,” but no, it’s any of them. That one child walks out the doorway and 15 relationships disappear, just like that! The number of relationships suddenly decreases exponentially and it all becomes a whole lot more simple. So that’s my free advice for what it’s worth. And it may be worth nothing, which is why it’s free!

## 2. BIBLICAL ADVICE: GOD IS AT WORK IN ALL KINDS OF FAMILIES.

YOU’RE NOT ALONE! Then there’s the Biblical advice. So here are all these families in scripture. And in one family after another, including Jesus’ family, there’s tension there. And in many ways this is should be seen as good news. This is good news because these families are introduced to us because they are precisely the families with whom God is at work. They are there in the scripture because God has not abandoned them, though they may deserve it! God is still at work in their midst. So if our family is like that: know that God is close. Know that God is close! And the best thing we can do today, before Thanksgiving comes, is to pray for them and for us . . . that God might be seen in the midst of whatever happens, and redeem whatever happens, for good. Even if it’s not good, that God would redeem it for good, and use us for good within that system. God is close and we are in great company if things are tough. And this is a story which goes all the way through the Bible so this is the general Biblical advice.

3. THE JESUS ADVICE: KNOW WHO YOU ARE. And then, what about the advice that comes from Jesus? Back to our passage: John Chapter 7. So here is Jesus. He’s with his brothers. They are skeptical of him and they are trying to force him to do something he does not want to do (‘go to the feast’).

And so often when we’re with our families we find that is exactly what happens. Somebody tries to force us to be somebody who we no longer are. They don’t know who we are any more. We have a different life, and yet when we go back into our families as some people say, “it’s as if I’ve come back and I’m age 10 all over again no matter what I’ve done, whatever I’ve accomplished there I am.”

It’s complicated there. Not only are there all those mathematical exponential relationships there! But more than that, when we are in our families we are actually perceived as different people. We are not just ‘our own self,’ we are also a husband, a wife, a child, a parent, an aunt, an uncle, a nephew a niece; and each person places on us a different hat. And if we don’t know who we are above all else, when we enter the arena we will find ourselves pushed and pulled in one direction or another by somebody who wants us to be something or someone else.

This is the situation Jesus finds himself in. So how does Jesus handle himself when he is in that situation? Well I think he handles himself by knowing quite simply who he is above everything else: He knows he is the Son of God. He knows

(to bring it into our realm of experience) that he is a child of God whose times (as the Psalmist says, 31:15) are in God's hands; whose life is in God's hands. And knowing that, knowing who he is, where he has come from, who he is, and who holds his future, it doesn't matter what the pressures are around about him. He has a strength and a confidence to pursue the path that God has called him to.

You and I need to think about who we are . . . child, parent, brother, sister, homemaker, attorney . . . what hat is important to us? But more than that, we need to believe the good news of the Gospel: that through Jesus Christ, not through what we have done, but through *what he has done for us*, we are first and foremost children of God . . . and nobody, nobody can tear away from us our dignity, created and recreated in the image of God, made known in Jesus Christ.

We may have messed up in life, or we may have made a great success of our life, but our dignity comes from what Christ has done for us, not from what we have done. And being assured of this is the basis for our peace in whatever troubled relationships we enter into.

At the beginning of John's gospel in Chapter 1 and at Verse 12 we read these words: "*Jesus came to his own. But his own did not receive him. But to all who received him he gave them power to become children of God*" . . . power to become children of God. And to know that we are children of God is in fact to have a power within our lives that no one and nothing can disrupt.

Of course all those tensions are still there. They were with Jesus' family; we can expect no less. But at the core there is a peace that comes from knowing who we are, as Jesus did. And so he stayed his course. And so he asks us to follow.

Trouble, tension, even in paradise? even in the Holy Family? I don't know how your family is or how your other relationships in various groups are . . . But (1) it gets complicated when there are more than a handful of people no matter who they are. And we see that complexity in all the story of Scripture, which (2) does not hide from us the difficulties of family life. But God has given us a Savior, a Savior who (3) knows who he is in the midst of everything and everyone else pushing and pulling him this way or that – a Savior who knows his time is in God's hands: his life, his person, his being . . . and he offers this gift, this good news, to you and me as well – children of God, princesses and princes, by the grace of God. And for this, I trust at this Thanksgiving we are all profoundly thankful.

Let us bow before God in prayer.

*Holy God who reaches down to us through Jesus Christ time and time and time again, thank you for including us in your family. Help us to know how to live in whatever family or grouping we find ourselves in and be present with us especially in our homes and with our families and in our lives this day and in the days to come, Amen.*

**THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**  
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016  
[www.NationalPres.org](http://www.NationalPres.org) 202.537.0800