

## “FAMILY TIES”

A Sermon for the Seventh Sunday of Easter, May 28, 2017

Text: Matthew 12:46-50

I recently learned how to use iTunes to organize a bit of a library of music so I can listen to what I want to listen to when driving or working out or whatever. Instead of listening to what somebody else wants me to listen to. Which means I am now only 16 years behind, technologically speaking. I am not fluent yet, but I have managed to put together a few playlists, etc. I am now my own DJ, so to speak.

These days, a lot of life is organized like that—so you listen only to what you want to hear and watch only what you choose to view, whether it is music or news or television shows or whatever. Even when you go to university, the number of required courses is shrinking.

It is an interesting discipline, then, for us to assemble weekly and take part in a scripted conversation in which, not only are the words we hear scripted, but even the words we speak and sing! I get to write my own sermon, but I am provided with a rotation of selected Scriptures to follow according to a calendar that is as old as the hills. In my ministry, this is about my fourteenth time through the three-year cycle.

So, here we are, the Seventh Sunday of Easter; and here we go again! As always we have read from the seventeenth chapter of the gospel of John, and we shall talk about the unity of the church, using as our text the words of Jesus’ so-called “High-Priestly Prayer.”

Well, forgive me if I rebel.

I decided on Tuesday to go wild today. You already know that Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven to keep his disciples one, to protect us, and keep us together, as he and the Father are one, and so on.

The reading is crystal clear, and blunt. You got it already.

So what I decided to do was pick a reading at random. That is what you get this morning. I chose an alternate reading by opening to a random page of Matthew, which is far more readable and interesting than John in so many ways, and blindly pointing to a place on the page. This is what I got: Matthew 12:46-50.

*While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”*

This is more fascinating to me than those generalizations in chapter 17 of John. Here, we have Jesus in the midst of a “crowd,” and we have tension. We therefore have a story. Some people outside the crowd, outside the building, are trying to reach Jesus. They want to speak to him. What do they want to tell him? According to Mark’s version of this same story, they wanted to “restrain” Jesus. People had been saying that Jesus was “out of his mind.” The things he was saying and doing were making him extremely popular, but at the same time he was destabilizing society because . . . why? Perhaps because he was raising expectations so high? Not sure.

Anyway, the drama in our substitute reading for today is great. Family ties vs. other ties. What other tie? What could be a stronger bond than our family bonds? Is Jesus going to let us down by choosing an alternative, higher unity than family unity?

Yes! There is a unity higher, more important and sacred even than the ties which bind family members together. That is what Jesus was talking about when he pointed to his disciples and said “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

When Jesus generalizes, we should take him seriously. What did he mean, “whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother”? What does it mean for us if we are Jesus’ “brother and sister and mother”? And crucially, what does it mean to “do the will of Jesus’ father in heaven?”

On that last question Jesus told a couple stories, for example:

Matthew 21:28-32 "What do you think? A man had two sons; he went to the first and said, 'Son, go and work in the vineyard today.' He answered, 'I will not'; but later he changed his mind and went. The father went to the second and said the same; and he answered, 'I go, sir'; but he did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The first." Jesus said to them, "Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes believed him; and even after you saw it, you did not change your minds and believe him.

When Jesus said in “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother,” he meant the same thing he meant when he told a story about someone doing the will of his father. One Jesus, one message. Do not think that

Jesus said, “Whoever is a good person and does the right things is my brother and sister and mother.” He meant that the one who repents and returns does the will of the Father.

Jesus told another story, about a so-called “Prodigal Son,” in which there were two children of one father. Again, it was obviously not the prodigal son who did the will of the Father, but (less obviously) neither was the “good son” doing the will of the Father by staying home and obeying his Father’s commands. For he did so unwillingly, only so he could earn his reward eventually. He passed the Marshmallow Test of delayed gratification, but that did not make him one “who did the will of the Father.”

No, to see someone “do the will of the Father in heaven, we have to wait until the bad son repents and returns to his Father’s mercy. That is what it means “to do the will of the Father in heaven.”

Parable after parable, healing after healing, teaching after teaching, Jesus showed us that to obey the will of the Father in heaven means to realize the truth, not about others but about ourselves, and turn to love God’s mercy; and then to run into the arms of the waiting Father. To return and live ever after within the dynamic of repentance and faith; to live by faith in the one whose mercy re-creates us and gives us new life.

Those who do so—those are the ones Jesus calls his brother and sister and mother.

In other words: although our unity with Christ, and our unity in Christ, and the presence of Christ in us is contingent, it does depend upon something, it does not depend upon how truly we fulfill what we know as commandments: to be kind, to be loving, to obey the 10 commandments or any other law of God. It depends upon our repentance and faith. In that repentance and faith, we lose anything we might want to boast of, and join with others in throwing

ourselves and our whole world upon the mercy of God.

Let me repeat that, because it is far from obvious. When Jesus says “Whoever does the will of my father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother,” he is not saying “Good people are my brother and sister and mother, and bad people are not.” He is not sorting people into good people and bad people, or he would be saying nothing new. Every commandment of our God or any other god does the same thing. Jesus was always saying something new. He was not just saying that it was time to shape our or ship out. He was saying, it is time to let go of your sanctimony and cash in the only stock you have that is worthy anything in the long run—and that is, that God’s love does not judge you according to your merits but according to his own mercy. How silly it would be to refuse that love, because only that love has the power to unite the whole world rather than dividing it.

I guess I forgot I was talking about Matthew, and I wound up back in John 17! This is the unity of the flock for which the good shepherd prayed, the unity Jesus has already given us, the unity we have at Bethlehem, and around the world with all who call Jesus Lord, and all who ever have, and all who ever will. We are all his, and he is ours. Not because we picked him (as he says in John 15) but because he chose us.

Amen.

