

Luther chapel homily, 23 September 2003, Mary Hess

Text: Luke 8:19-21

I have to be honest, ordinarily I deeply appreciate the practice of praying with the Catholic lectionary, it gives me a source to work from and traces a daily path worth following. When I read today's appointed text, however, my first impulse was to turn the page quickly and find a different text.

Still, the thing about a daily practice is that if it's going to become a fruitful habit, you have to keep working with it, even on those days when you're not interested, or a text raises all sorts of questions you'd just rather not think about.

Today's text is one of those for me.

"My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Or, if you prefer the New American Bible translation, "those who hear the word of God and act on it."

I can't help it, most of the time when I hear this text the first thing I think of is that Jesus is comparing family relationships with hearing God's word – and the family relationship comes a distant second.

I think it's fairly clear from the passages immediately before this text – in Luke they include the parable of the sower and the parable of the lamp – that the

author of Luke was interested in emphasizing the importance of hearing the word of God and responding to it.

But why do so in a way that appears to be at odds with family?

I mean, why wasn't Jesus more solicitous of his family? The text doesn't actually say that he ignored his family, but when someone comes to tell you that your family is trying to reach you through a large crowd and you respond with a different definition of who your family is, it's hard not to feel like there's a problem.

It's easy for me to put myself in the place of his mother, and wonder why he doesn't have time for me, and why he wants to claim these other folk as mother and brothers.

Is Jesus trying to redefine what mother and brothers means? Indeed, is he trying to redefine family here? If I am a mother who worries about her son's feelings and my place within them, such a redefinition is threatening.

Consider this:

"Family values" has become a code phrase in a number of contexts for religious beliefs, particularly those beliefs which imply consequences for action in our cultural commons.

I'm sure you've heard it said that the same kids who left church after confirmation, return to it upon having their own children – so that their children will have proper values. Presumably, so that they will hear the word of God and act on it. The equation becomes – “if we want our kids to hear the word of God and act on it, they must have family values instilled in them. Let's send them to Sunday school.”

But what happens if they hear the word of God and act on it – and their action becomes leaving school to take up missionary work in some distant land?

Or what happens if they hear the word of God and act on it – and their action becomes loving someone of the same gender so much they want to marry them?

Or what happens if they hear the word of God and act on it – and their action becomes advocacy for children who are not yet born?

Or what happens if they hear the word of God and act on it – and their action becomes loving the earth enough to live entirely “off the grid”?

Each of these are actions that grow out of deep convictions about hearing the word of God, and each of them have embedded in them expanded definitions of “family.”

Another way to look at this would be to ask, do our religious beliefs lead to family values, that is, does hearing the word of God and acting upon it

automatically convey specific “family values,” or is it possible that being in a family defines for each of us what we mean by “family values”?

Is it possible, for instance, that in this text rather than defining family based on ideological conviction, Jesus is asking us to move from our experience --- to think about our deepest connections, our deepest loving ties to our immediate family members – and asking us to extend that relationship, to broaden that metaphor, to *include* people beyond the biological/ adopted matrix?

In other words, rather than my immediate reaction, of being a mother watching her son explain away his connection to me, could I be a mother watching her son with deep love and pride as he *builds* from his relationship with me? As he moves from the security of such a relationship to extend it beyond me to those society deems inappropriate?

When we ache for the loved ones we have left behind to join the Luther community do we interpret that longing as further evidence of the need to leave behind such human ties, such human yearnings to follow “a better path” laid out by God? Or instead, could we hear in this text an affirmation of our decision to move into broader service? To “leave the nest,” as it were, and to share the love we’ve found there with a broader community?

To do so, I think we’d have to acknowledge and support families into sharing such love. That would require a different kind of Sunday School. It would require something other than the “drive by” drop off, intended to somehow instill family values, but rather an intentional and concerted effort on the part of

church families to reach out to all those among and around us who haven't yet experienced the kind of deep love that leads to centered identities, to "centered life" – to use a phrase from our context here.

In recent years researchers have described and documented how people's understandings of God can often be traced very directly to their earliest experiences of family, particularly those experiences in which they were powerless in relation to family authority. So how a child feels about God may have just as much, if not more, to do with her experience of her own mother and father, and how they used their power *in relation to her*, as it does with any Sunday School curriculum, no matter how well designed and faithfully implemented.

My own hunch for instance, is that new parents "return" to church at the point of raising young children, because parenting young children provokes all sorts of profound existential questions that they intuitively feel might be addressed in faith contexts.

Think about it. Is Jesus redefining family ideologically as a way out of his family, or could Jesus be pointing to these primal relationships and then asking us to shared that depth of relationality more broadly, to understand ourselves as intimately connected to all those people who are also intimately bound through faith in God?

Who are my mother and brothers, not to mention father and sisters?

I think this is a very important question.

Not too long ago a Christian pastor named Paul Hill was executed for murdering a doctor who performed abortions. Hill sincerely believed that he was hearing God's word and acting upon it. But I doubt that he also believed that the two men he killed, Dr. John Britton, and James Barrett, his volunteer escort, were his brothers.

This is an egregious example of the ways in which religious identity formation can lead to problems, but while it's on the *end* of a spectrum of identity formation, it's still *on* the spectrum. Reasonable people of faith, deeply convicted of their beliefs, will find themselves disagreeing on what it means to "act" on these beliefs.

In our contemporary context, a context which is thoroughly pervaded by individualism and by numerous opportunities to form "communities of the like-minded" rather than communities of dialogue, let alone communities of struggle, it can be remarkably seductive to look for a community of faith, a church, based on shared interpretations, shared practices, shared beliefs in "hearing the word of God and acting on it."

Perhaps the church you were "born into" has ideas you no longer agree with. It's easier to start going to the church down the road that shares your interpretation, than to continue to worship in a setting in which you know you hold a minority

view. Far too often I hear around *this* place, within *these* walls, talk about how the church will “come apart” when this or that decision is made. But the thing about a mother is that, no matter how much you may disagree with her, she’s still your mother.

In fact, today in some ways it may only be in our families that we are still forced to confront differing beliefs. You don’t choose your mother or your brothers, or your father or your sisters, for that matter. You are born or adopted into those relationships. Parents and siblings are not choices you make, they are realities you learn to live with.

And I wonder if the word of God isn’t in some ways like that, too. A reality so overwhelming in substance and force that we have to live with it and into it. In other words, a reality that is precisely *not* a choice, but rather an all consuming relationality that we can do nothing but accept as gift.

So perhaps instead of hearing this text as Jesus naming his “true kindred” (to use the phrase that heads my synoptic gospels version of this text), and therefore “dissing” his mother and siblings in favor of his ideological colleagues, we could hear it rather as Jesus using that deeply unchosen, deeply intimate, and deeply loving relationality he *learned* from his mother and brothers, as an analogue for what it means to hear God’s word and act on it.

If that’s the case, then the “family values” religious educators – indeed, whole church communities -- need to support, include helping people grasp the deeply

connecting bonds of family, and then helping them to recognize that these bonds include more than our immediate families.

In a few moments we'll sing one of my favorite Brian Wren hymns, which has a line in it that goes like this: "when love is torn and trust betrayed, pray strength to love til torments fade, till lovers keep no score of wrong but hear through pain love's Easter song."

This line gets at the heart of the kind of deep learning that can happen in a family, when people have to confront their differences *and* still maintain love for each other. Anyone who has ever loved someone else, particularly in a family, knows that love is never easy or simple, and just believing in love doesn't make it possible to really live in love.

I can't think of a better way to describe that kind of sacrament of love than to speak of hearing through pain "love's Easter song." I think perhaps, as we struggle through the challenging debates now ravaging many communities of faith, we need to hold onto the notion of being mothers and brothers and fathers and sisters in faith, of being in community with people who hear God's word and act upon it – and we need, specifically, to move in love, not defensive insecurity as we do so. We need to be able to be a mother watching her son expand his definition of family to include *all* others around us.

Amen.