

“We Are Family”
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Genesis 3:8-15
Mark 3:20-35

“*Where are you?*” God asks this question to Adam and Eve when they hid themselves from God among the trees of the Garden of Eden. They had just eaten of the forbidden fruit, and they could see for the first time; they realized they were naked, and so they stitched fig leaves together to make loincloths for themselves.

Although God had formed all that they were and all that they had, they were ashamed. God questions them— “*where are you?*” -- not because God doesn’t know where they are; God surely knows. God asks the question as a way of reorienting them, to regain their bearings, for they have lost their way.¹ God asked the question as if the question could cut through their shame and restore them to a place before they could see and know what shame feels like.

It couldn’t.

A ritual that has made its way from the time our daughter could talk, to her middle school years, is a series of questions we ask her at the end of the night, a modification of the *examen* practice, based in Ignatian spirituality.

We ask her: what is something that made you happy today?
What is something that made you sad today?
Where was God today?

In other words, we ask her, “*Where are you?*”

I’m not sure how long she’ll keep the door open to doing this practice with us. But it is a chance to ask, “Where are you?” in the landscape of all that is going on in her world, and to encourage the connection to wonder where God is in her

¹ Salt Lectionary Commentary for June 9, 2024

experience of it. I understand there will be times when, just like Adam and Eve, she will hide from us. But I hope the imprint of these questions will help her continue to pause for reflection— even when she wants to do it independently from us.

We see in our gospel passage today a time when Jesus breaks free of the hovering concern of his parents. It was a time when the crowds have followed Jesus from the synagogue to the sea; they followed him from the mountain where he sought refuge from the crowds and backup from his 12 disciples, to his home. The crowd was so thick inside the house, people could not even lift their elbows to eat. Understandably, his family was concerned, and came to set him straight. Some worried about Jesus' mental health— they wondered if he had gone out of his mind; the actual Greek translates that they said "*he is standing outside.*" He is *outside* of our teaching, our ways, our influence, our control. The scribes, who had come all the way from Jerusalem, took it a step further, accusing Jesus of having Beelzebul in him. Beelzebul, you should know, was considered the Lord of the Dung Heap, where the flies would fester and fly— in other words, the God of a Pile of Poo.

I can imagine his family wondering about Jesus, "Where are you" in all this? They tried to reel him back; they sent to him and called him, and even the crowd joined in, saying, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside waiting for you." But Jesus had stepped into a way of knowing and seeing that would connect him to people far beyond his family ties. He responded to them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" then he gestured to the crowd, saying, "here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my mother and brother and sister."

Debie Thomas wrote of that moment, "When I think of Mary standing outside that house, waiting for her son, my heart breaks. I think of my own mother, and of the many times I have kept her waiting. I think of my son, and of how devastated I would feel if he renounced me."

At the same time, those who have never been able to find the love and care they need from their families may relate to what Jesus said, as they piece together belonging from sources that go beyond blood ties.

For the LGBTQ+ community, some bear scars of scorn from their families, who accuse their loved one of standing outside what they have taught, or even worse— of influenced by something demonic. But in reality, their loved one is on a journey to see how the Holy Spirit is at work in their lives and how they can honor that call with their body and their love. The song, “We Are Family” performed by Sister Sledge that came out of the disco era in the late 70’s gave “family’ a different meaning, offering freedom from the emotional weight of familial alienation while providing an environment where everyone belonged, no matter who they were.”² I think the way Jesus used the term brother, sister, and mother offers a queer understanding of what family is and who family can be.

At a party over the weekend, I was in a conversation with parents who were sharing words they hear their teen and tween children use. If you are in a bilingual household, I offer my deep respect, because your language challenges, with slang mixed in, become even more complex ... but also interesting. Your efforts at trying to understand each other are a real act of love. My crowd compared notes and shared intel to help one another decode. I’ve come to realize that *preppy* doesn’t mean now what it meant in the 1980s; it’s not a polo shirt with the collar popped up. Another parent taught me that Sigma is the new Alpha— someone— often male— who is confident, respected, successful, but also can stand alone. “Why can’t a word just mean what it says it means?” one parent lamented, after she was told that “Netflix and chill” does *not* mean quietly watching a movie together at home. The truth is, every generation goes through a sorting of the mysteries of the words and sayings a younger generation uses, and each older generation finds ways to problematize youth. But I’m sure if you asked our most senior members what they did and said teenagers that their parent’s generation did not understand, you might hear some interesting stories. I love it that next Sunday, our worship will be led by the church children and youth. Those of us who are older need to be in the practice of listening to what they are saying and wondering, even as their meaning is still being formed.

Clearly, Jesus’ reworking of meaning was causing a stir— not just with words like “brother, sister, mother,” but also with notions of how God interacts with the world and even of what God requires of us.

² Darragh Chaplin, “We Are Family: How Sister Sledge Made a Home for LGBTQ+ Individuals” in *Dig!* April 8, 2021

So often the way that Genesis gets read is that this story of Adam and Eve eating that fruit is the story of how sin entered the world. They took the one requirement God gave them for life in paradise, and they sunk their teeth into it. The conventional understanding is that first sin is the reason for removal from paradise, the need for hard work, pain in childbirth, the dynamics between genders, and why snakes slither rather than walk. It is the reason for our eventual death. And for Christians, it is through Jesus that salvation comes and overcomes that sin.

But just as Jesus expanded the meaning of family, I think it is time that Christians expand the meaning of our stories of how God intervenes. Because in many ways, we are still hiding like Adam and Eve in that Eden garden.

The way Genesis tells it, God was taking a walk in the garden, enjoying the evening breeze. This does not sound like the kind of fearful presence you need to hide from. It does not seem like this is a God who is about to throw a lightning bolt and smite these beings of God's creation. I wonder if the sense of estrangement we sometimes feel from God is more from our own creating than something God casts over us like a brooding shadow. Maybe we need to revisit the myths of our separation from goodness and from God, and discover that these connections are more ingrained in us than even our DNA.

The truth is, some of us have a family life that upholds us and nourishes us and enriches our life with love. Some of us do not have that— due to loss, or due to something that may have never been there. But regardless of what family may or may not give to us, the gospel message tells us this good good news: Jesus weaves us into a family bond through his siblinghood, and that tie is stronger than anything can damage or sever. It is a tie that embraces and upholds us, feeds us and gives us care. Not only that, it is a tie that secures us in ways that allow us to stretch and reach, to go beyond what we know, and beyond who we know, to grow and embrace the people and the ideas that the Spirit is sharing with us.

Where are you?

Wherever you are, may you be in that space while knowing that you are in the family and the household of God.