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First Christian Church  
Colorado Springs, Colorado  
March 15, 2015  
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## “Whoever”

Mark 3:31 NRSV Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "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."

I guarantee you: you will not find these verses on any Hallmark Mother's Day card. And Jesus is even more stern in other places. For example, in Luke's gospel we have this rather harsh statement, a line that I guarantee you will not find embroidered into anyone's decorative pillows: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even their own life--such a person cannot be my disciple." Or in John's gospel, at the wedding at Cana, when Jesus' mother tells him the wine has run out and he needs to do something about it, he responds in a way that I think that all of us would label disrespectful if it came from our children's mouths: "Woman, you must not tell me what to do!" What do we make of all of this?

Our scripture from Mark this morning, where Jesus talks about who is his family and says those seemingly disturbing and even disrespectful words, has a back-story. In the verses before the ones that we heard and which are printed in your bulletin, Jesus has continued to be about his ministry, traveling about the countryside, attracting larger and larger crowds, performing healings and miracles, and increasingly coming to the attention of some of the religious authorities (who were always nervous when anyone attracted a crowd because they worried that Roman persecution might not be far behind). But his friends began to worry about him. His family was concerned that he had, well, lost it. Mark tell us, in fact, at verse 21: "When his family heard what was happening, they came to take control of him. They were saying, 'He's out of his mind!'"

And so what did they do? They resolved to go get him and take him home, to try to rescue him from whatever he had gotten himself into, whatever madness was possessing him. So Jesus' family, his mothers and his brothers arrive, hoping, I suspect, to quietly take him home. But it was not to be. The house where Jesus was preaching had such a crowd present that his family could only stand at the back and ask those in front of them to pass the word quietly to him. They must have hoped that he, in turn, would quietly agree. But it was not to be. Instead, Jesus announces to the whole crowd "No, these folks right here are my mother and brothers – whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." To use the language of Twelve Step groups, his family attempted an "intervention" – hoping to wean Jesus away from whatever demon they thought had a hold of him – but instead he even more adamantly made it clear that he intended to do what he understood himself called to do.

It's a poignant story, isn't it? What could have motivated Jesus' family to react this way? I, for one, actually find myself sympathetic to them. Forget, for a moment, that this is holy scripture and try to imagine both hearing this for the first time and hearing it as if it were happening today. A friend's young adult child – or maybe it's *your* young adult child – has become (to your point of view, anyway) obsessed with a new calling. You don't understand it. It scares you. You hear about people that your young man is making angry, so angry they want to do him harm. You heard that he was even at the center of a near-riot in your old hometown (as was in fact told earlier in Mark). You don't really understand what he's doing or why. And, truth be told, you're a bit embarrassed. You're proud of your family name and you fear that he will sully it, you fear that his actions will reflect on you. You're not terribly proud of that emotion, but there it is.

Do you hear the dominant element in this brief re-telling and updating: it's **fear**. Fear of what could happen, **fear** of change that upsets the stability that you have

achieved, **fear** of the unknown, **fear** for the safety of you and yours. But that's a hard way to live, isn't it? As one preacher eloquently says:

Fear drives us to isolate ourselves from those who are different..... Fear turns us into self-appointed protectors who seek to control those around us and keep them from doing anything that would upset our carefully constructed security. Fear drives us to demonise others when they step out of our boundaries of religious or cultural acceptability. Fear teaches us to wage war, to hunt witches, to hate the "other" and to close our hearts to the new.<sup>1</sup>

Do you know the story of Ruby Bridges? Fifty-five years ago, the elementary schools in New Orleans were desegregated. In an article in Guideposts, Mrs. Bridges, who was one of half a dozen six-year-olds chosen to attend first grade at a formerly all-white school tells her story. Listen to her words: Accompanied by two Federal marshalls, she says,

...people shouted and shook their fist when [I] got out of the car.... I held my mother's hand and followed the marshals through the crowd, up the steps into the school.... White parents [were] pointing at us and yelling, then rushing their children out of the school.... Someone had [put] a black doll in a coffin..... [The next morning, my mother couldn't accompany me, but told me] "Remember, if you get afraid, say your prayers. You can pray to God anytime, anywhere. He will always hear you." That was how I started praying on the way to school. The things people yelled at me didn't seem to touch me. Prayer was my protection.... [My teacher told me] "It's not easy for people to change once they have gotten used to living a certain way".... "Some of them don't know any better and they're afraid. But not everyone is like that." .... [My teacher watched me walk into school every day.] One morning when I got to our classroom, she said she'd been surprised to see me talk to the mob. "I saw your lips moving," she said, "but I

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<sup>1</sup><http://sacredise.com/blog/?p=1157>

couldn't make out what you were saying to those people." I wasn't talking to them," I told her. "I was praying for them." .... Please be with me, I'd ask... God, and be with those people too. Forgive them because they don't know what they're doing.<sup>2</sup>

Writer Anne Lamott has said "'Courage is fear that has said its prayers.'" You or I may never need to face the kind of fear that six-year-old Ruby Bridges faced. But we all do have *something* we fear, *something* that is blocking us, *something* that holds us back, *something* that is deferring our dreams, *something* that we keep carefully locked away. It may be big or small, but it is there, isn't it? Jesus' response to his parents who were fearful for the calling he had and Ruby Bridges' response to those who taunted her remind us that God indeed has a purpose for each one of us and a promise to never leave us. Where do your fears need to say their prayers?

The other reason that Jesus' response to his mother and brothers may startle us is because of what he says about "family." You know what? It would have startled those around him even more! You see, the whole situation of "family" in both Old and New Testament times was vastly different from our era. The story of God's people in Genesis doesn't begin with nations or peoples, it begins with a family. And, as one writer reminds us,

...in first century Palestine. The family unit was more than that entity into which an individual was born; it was security, it was standing.... [F]amily needed one another to survive.... To be cast out of the family... (or to leave voluntarily) could mean economic hardship and even... death.<sup>3</sup>

But, then or now, what ties the experience of family together is the fact that, in the

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<sup>2</sup><http://www.rubybridges.com/story.htm>

<sup>3</sup><http://www.stewardshipoflife.org/2012/06/one-big-hopeful-family/>

words of another writer, “Family is... a powerful force. It defines us from our earliest moments. It shapes our aspirations.... It teaches us how to live with others and influences our expectations of all the relationships we will hold.”<sup>4</sup> But here’s the thing: Jesus’ pointed and even harsh words are meant to be a reminder to us that even the best of families are not enough, and, moreover, can even sometimes become a substitute for God – in Biblical terms, an idol.

Barbara and I once attended a wedding where the couple had written their own vows. This was part of what they said to each other: “I will be your best and only thing; I will meet your every need; we won’t need anyone else.” I cringe remembering that statement because, first of all, it’s simply not true. No person can ever fully meet anyone else’s needs; it’s just not possible. It’s not even desirable. One’s family, one’s spouse, can and should indeed be of exceedingly great importance but Jesus’ words remind us that not only does every person have a purpose and a mission in life, so does every family, every couple, every relationship. In every wedding that I perform I usually remind the couple that one of their obligations to ask themselves what mission to the world their marriage will be, how will the world – not just themselves – be a better place because of their life together as a couple.

Not to do so, to focus inward – particularly if that inward focus is fueled by fear – will more and more and more lead, paradoxically but nonetheless surely, for you in fact being less able to meet your spouse’s or family’s needs! And you will miss out on some opportunity to follow Jesus in his asking you to be a blessing to this world. As one conservative Christian preacher puts the point: “There is such a thing as domestic idolatry, the worship of a family, making a family everything, every involvement, every commitment, every engagement measured and judged by the question, ‘How will this benefit my family?’ That can be an immense tragedy.... [For] If any earthly loyalty is

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<sup>4</sup><http://words.dancingwiththeword.com/2012/06/re-defining-family.html>

made central then it become idolatry, and all idolatries end up in destroying their devotees.”<sup>5</sup> What does that mean? Well, you see, here’s the thing. Your family WILL disappoint you. And you will disappoint them. You will fail your spouse sometimes. He or she will fail you. You won’t be at your best, you won’t always meet needs in the way that you wish you could. And if your relationship or your family – or, for that matter, your job, or your reputation, or anything else – is what is most important to you, you will end up back in that fearful place – worrying that you’ve not done enough, can’t do enough, should have done more.

And that’s a hard way to live. What’s the alternative? Well, let’s return to the words of Jesus: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother,” and let me close with two suggestions about how we can live out Jesus’ words, neither finding ourselves over-fearful nor making family and relationships into an idol. First, look for ways to offer the love and care and gifts you have to a wider circle. After all, as one preacher puts it, “In a world of grandparents without grandchildren close by, and single-parent families, and grandchildren growing up without grandparents, and marriages under stress, you need a bigger family than the one you were born into. You must be born again into a new, far flung family, a family as large as the love of God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>6</sup> How can you help meet that need? Our IHN volunteers expanded that circle of family this past week. Those who went on the Shiprock Mission trip found themselves with new family members whom their gifts were able to help – and who enriched their lives in turn. Or maybe it’s simply the smile you give to the newcomer to worship with their squirmy baby, letting them know that this congregation wants to be a place that can be an extension of family, sharing the love of God.

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<sup>5</sup><http://www.alfredplacechurch.org.uk/index.php/sermons/mark/chapter-3/331-35-how-to-be-in-jesus-family/>

<sup>6</sup>[http://day1.org/2201-why\\_jesus\\_part\\_4\\_jesus\\_the\\_home\\_wrecker](http://day1.org/2201-why_jesus_part_4_jesus_the_home_wrecker)

And second, when Jesus talks about “the will of God,” I think that part of that will for your life and mine, part of God’s fervent hope for every creature is that we will not be afraid. That phrase appears countless times in the Bible. It is the angel’s first word to Mary announcing the coming of Jesus, and it is the angel’s last word to her as well at that empty tomb. Instead God wants you to know, as I said, the purpose He has for you and the promise that He will never leave you. How do you know that, how can you let that reality live in you? Well, here are some ideas: Don’t isolate yourself, even when you are so very tempted to. Turn off the tv – at least swear off the screaming from both the right and the left who only want to tap into your fear and make it worse. Read about another culture or another group, one that you have trouble understanding, and ask God to help remind you that God’s notion of family is indeed far wider than ours.

None of these are magic. But they can open us up ever more to the amazing work that God wants to do in and through each one of us and through this church. Will you join me in trying to do those things in the coming week, in seeking concrete ways to expand your role in the family of God and in saying “no” to fear?