

# **Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Mary Koon**

**March 13, 2022**

**Matthew 12: 46-50 (NRSV)**

## Family Ties

### Prayer for Illumination

Draw us close, Holy Spirit, as the Scriptures are read and the Word is proclaimed. Let the word of faith be in our hearts, and let all other words slip away. Let the voice we hear today be that of grace, truth and love. Amen.

Today we'll be looking at a short passage from the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. This story comes at close of the chapter after a number of scenes in which Jesus is healing, teaching, preaching, and is subsequently challenged by religious authorities.

Word of Jesus is spreading and crowds continue to follow him. He is a dynamic teacher, powerful preacher, compassionate healer, despite the rising concern of those in power.

At the close of this chapter, he winds up at a house, speaking to a large group. We don't know who exactly is in the house...presumably the faith-ful, hopeful, the curious, those in power, those who felt they had been left aside, and many eager for a word of solace and insight.

Matthew 12: 46-50 (NRSV)

While he, Jesus, 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." AMEN

When you think of family, what comes to mind? (Write in FB, or if you are here, call it out.)

The most immediate response I have to that word family is one of home and warmth. I think of my parents, my children, grandchildren, and I know that I am very fortunate.

Think of extended family, and spouses and babies born. I think of friends that are like family.

I remember big Christmases and Easters, as well as the many years when circumstance made it impossible to be together, and the ache that left.

I think of my husband Jim speaking warmly about the men at his childhood church who stepped up and nurtured him after Jim lost his father to a heart attack when he was 7.

I think of women friends who intentionally started and grew their families as single parents.

So much emotion and much of it love-filled and yet...

I also think of cousins and dear friends with whom I've lost contact. And families like Bill's, an old friend who died before reconciling with his daughter after learning she was a lesbian. Or my uncles who didn't speak after a huge fight over which branch of the military had the best food.

I think of refugee families, leaving everything to escape war and dangerous governments, making new connections, creating family in a new land. And our partner family from Afghanistan, who after only a day, told Kathy that we were his family now.

I think of LGBTQAI youth who are kicked out of their home, and work so hard to build intentional connections and family units.

And I think of the Church, historically quick to talk about family, yet known for excluding for those who are "different".

Families come in all shapes and sizes, created by blood and by choice. Today, Jesus challenges us to expand our understanding of family for the sake of the gospel and for the future of our world.

Jesus often used paradox and reversal to shatter conventional wisdom of his time, and his statement about family would have done so.

In ancient, near east culture, the family was the primary social unit – center of identity and security, not so unlike today. The family unit was patriarchal, reflecting a culture in which males held all the power, and women, those differently-abled, outside the dominant culture none of it. Again, not terribly unlike today.

We rarely think about Jesus' family life in the church, other than our Christmas celebration of his extraordinary birth. A careful reading of the New Testament, reveals that Joseph was an adoptive, and presumably loving, caring father, and Mary initially was a single, frightened, young mother. The family is formed under an oppressive regime and not long after Jesus' birth, became refugees, fleeing death-dealing Herod. Jesus grew up in a faithful Jewish family. We know that they traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover, where Jesus became separated from them. In that story, Luke shows us an understandably frantic and upset Mary when she discovers the 12 year old chilling in the temple with the rabbis. And in the text we just read we learn that Jesus had siblings.

I am so curious about Jesus' nuclear family. I wonder what Jesus learned from Joseph in his shop. Did he fight with his brothers growing up the way I argued with my own? I wonder if Mary was proud of Jesus and his mission, or hurt by him, or confused, or angry or frightened. Or maybe all of that, because she was his mom.

What we do know is that when Jesus speaks of family, he does so from the context of being part of one, and not from a place of clinical indifference.

His words in Matthew are spare and directed, and this story is important enough to found in Luke and Mark, too.

When we read this text at our Thursday Bible study, one of the first reactions to Jesus' words was indignation on behalf of Mary. Who are my mother and brothers? Ouch! How could she not have felt a little bit (or a lot) hurt? Hi Jesus, we're here and want to see you...My family is here? With a sweeping gesture, Jesus points away from his traditional family and toward the disciples and the crowd, stating that those who do God's will, they are my family.

I do not think that this teaching is meant to imply that family isn't important, or that Jesus wants people to give up their family and responsibilities and connects for the sake of their mission or calling.

Rather, Jesus is saying that what matters most in life is doing the will of God, placing God in the center of our lives. Loving one another is what creates and sustains family. Loving not just those who live with you, or look and think like you.

The truth is really, we are one human family, and we belong to one another.

Family are those with whom we "do life." And if the last two years have taught us anything, we do life with people near and far. Even with those whom we have only a short connection.

The author and scholar Marcus Borg suggests that when Jesus talks about family, he is flipping conventional wisdom on its head, and calling out traditional understandings of what makes and sustains family and its patriarchal patterns.

Borg says that Jesus spoke, like many sages, proclaiming that there is a way of life and a way of death, a wise way and a foolish way. Then, and still today, we may think that the wise way is one of conventional wisdom, and the foolish way one of disregarding that wisdom, but Jesus is always reversing that. (Borg, Marcus, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, pg. 80-81.)

We see Jesus walking the land and creating family wherever he went. And he encourages us, as followers, to use our imaginations, our time, talents, and resources to co-create a world where doing God's will is what forms family.

When Jesus gestures to the crowd outside that home, calling them family, it would have brought comfort and hope to the widow, the orphan, the outcast in that crowd.

Jesus says to them, to us, "You are loved. You are here to love. You are part of my family, of God's family."

I once heard it said that when we pray the Lord's prayer, which we do week after week, and begin with the words, "Our Father or Our Mother" we give up the right to make our own decisions about who our siblings are.

No doubt – family is messy. Whether it is family of choice or blood, people are complex and complicated. Love allows us to forgive, to keep on trying, to keep showing up.

My seminary professor Dr. Ted Jennings used to say that there is no future that is not Jesus shaped. He did not mean that the world should all become Christian, but meant that unless and until we recognize that we are all part of God’s family, that we belong to and are responsible for each other, we will continue to fight and destroy and tear one another apart. So we continue to follow Jesus, to stay connected and learn ways of being family even when it isn’t simple or convenient.

Families are being formed all the time, springing up where seeds of God’s love, peace, and justice are planted.

Our human family is facing difficult situations in our own church and community and all over the world. In the midst, we can witness people offering support and love, bearing and speaking truth to power.

I want to share a couple of examples that sparked my imagination about what family means this week.

I saw a photo of empty strollers lined up at a train station in Poland, left there by Polish people so that parents with small children arriving with just the clothing on their backs will have a way to care for their children. That’s family.

And have you seen the stories of Indigenous people wearing colorful Ukrainian scarves? They are called Kokum scarves, which is the Cree word for grandmother. In an article I read in NPR, a person from the Cree Nation in Canada said that she felt a real kinship with those who are being forced to leave their lands, as that was the situation with the Indigenous community not so long ago. It turns out that Ukrainian immigrants and Cree communities often worked closely together during times of major hardship and famine.

<https://www.npr.org/2022/03/12/1086274354/native-protest-for-ukraine>

Elona Street Stewart, the first indigenous co-moderator of the PCUSA and Executive Director of the Synod of Lakes and Prairies brought this to my attention a couple of weeks ago.

In an article called “Why Ukrainian Floral Scarves,” published on May 11, 2021, the author Mallory Yawngwe writes,

Long ago, when Ukrainian people arrived in this territory, they brought with them beautiful floral patterned fabrics that were a natural compliment to the floral patterns found in Cree, Dene, and Metis beadwork. Our grandmothers adopted these patterns as they worked closely with their new neighbors to help each other.

When I was growing up, I often watched nohkum (my grandmother) with her hair tied up in a scarf picking berries, preparing meat, cooking for a feast or watching the grandkids. To me, “kokum scarves” are a symbol that embodies the intrepid and entrepreneurial spirit of my grandmothers: women who worked relentlessly to find opportunity, and to build relationships and cooperation among families and nations to ensure our survival. That’s what “kokum scarves” mean to me.

Yawnghwe writes, For me, the “kokum scarf” also represents a love for one another. (<https://www.indigenousbox.ca/blogs/news/kokumscarf> )

That’s family. And that gives me hope.

May Jesus’ invitation to the work of forming family through love result in a resounding yes from our hearts, hands and voices.

AMEN