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The Gospel of Luke
XXV. The Family God Creates
Luke 8:16-21

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I received a call one day from a young man who had recently gotten out of prison. This was in a church I was serving before coming here. This young man was a child of that church, but an addiction to alcohol and drugs had gotten him off-track pretty early in his adult life. Anyway, the reason he was calling was because he had sobered up in prison and found new faith in Jesus Christ as his Lord and Savior. And, ever since, he had devoted himself to reading the Bible from beginning to end – something he had continued to do even after his release. What he wanted from me was to check to see if he was understanding the Bible correctly – he had some questions about several particular passages he had read.

We made an appointment to meet. He came to my office, Bible in hand, questions written down on a notepad. And we got started. In my thirty-five years as a pastor, I have heard a number of, shall we say, “out there” interpretations of Scripture. But never before or since have I heard someone as far off the mark as this fellow. His love for the Bible was sincere, his wrestling with the Word of God admirable, even enviable – would that we should be so committed to reading our Bibles! But I have never heard someone get so much so really wrong. His reading of the Bible was so mangled, I hardly knew where to start. Imagine a sort of Star Wars meets Nostradamus meets Sylvester Stallone in Rocky parts I and II meets the Lord of the Rings meets end-time prophecy charts meets – I don’t even know what else. We worked through a few passages together, and then I suggested to him that maybe it would be a good idea for him to start coming to Sunday worship again – maybe even join a Sunday School class or Men’s Bible Study group. You know – get a little more regular help in his reading of the Bible. I’ll never forget how he answered me. He thought about that for a moment, and then said, “*No. I think I’m better off as kind of a solitary Christian.*”

I have thought about that conversation so many times since then – especially his statement that he thought he would be better off as a “solitary Christian.” On the one hand, his idea of coming at the faith only from his own perspective was certainly a fit for the individualistic mindset that so dominates our culture. I mean, we are raised up from the cradle to be a “me” – first, last, and always. And we only reluctantly consent to allow our almighty “me” to be subsumed into the larger context of “us.” But, on the other hand, his insistence on going it alone meant that he had no checks and balances on his faith, no sounding board for his understanding – no one to tell him that he was getting it wrong. That old saying about someone who represents himself in a court of law having a fool for a client applies also to interpreting the Bible and living the Christian life. A solitary Christian is someone who may very well have a fool for a teacher.

But it's even more than that. Because what the Bible tells us, cover to cover, is that there can be no such thing as a solitary Christian. That the very phrase "solitary Christian" is, in fact, an oxymoron – like "jumbo shrimp" or a "civil war" or a "working vacation." According to the Bible, you just can't be both a Christian and solitary – because the very definition of a Christian is not only someone redeemed from his or her sins, but also someone welcomed into, baptized into, adopted into the family of God, the household of faith, the church of Jesus Christ. There is no such thing as a Christianity apart from other Christians, discipleship apart from the communion of the saints. Because, as we said on Pentecost, the whole point of what God is doing through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, through the power and presence of the Holy Spirit, is to unite all of God's people into one people, one Kingdom, one church.¹ In our culture we may place the "me" before the "us" – but not in the Bible. In the Bible, God's great purpose of salvation in Jesus Christ is all about transforming all of us self-contained, selfish little "Me's" into the "Us" of the eternal people of God, the family God is creating on earth through His Son, our Brother and Lord, Jesus Christ.

And that is the context which lies behind Jesus' seemingly strange response when told that His family is waiting for Him outside. Jesus is teaching to a packed house – literally, such that His mother and brothers can't even begin to get in to see Him. So, they send in a message to Him – probably through something like that party game "Telephone" – except that the last person to receive the message actually gets it correct, saying to Jesus, "*Your mother and brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.*" Now, what is the proper and expected response to such a message? A joyful response, perhaps: "*Wonderful! I have missed them so much. Tell them I'll be right out!*" Or an annoyed response, perhaps: "*What now?! Tell them I'm busy and I'll be with them when I am finished!*" Any response, in fact, would seem reasonable and expected when compared with the response Jesus actually makes: "*My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*"

So much for family values! No, actually Jesus' response is all about family values – but God's Kingdom family values. That taking precedence even over the family of our birth is this family God is creating through the hearing and doing of His Word. The family lineage marked out not by bloodlines, but by the waters of baptism. And membership in this family God creates is not – let me say this again – is not an optional part of Christianity – it is part and parcel of the very essence and goal of Christianity. It is not a mere byproduct of our being saved, for us to take or to leave as we see fit. Rather membership in this family God creates is part and parcel of the very salvation God is bringing into this world – His plan to unite all things in Christ Jesus. Membership in God's family, the church, is not optional. It is the very essence of what it means to have been saved by Christ – a family membership transcending even our earthly family membership: "*My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.*"

So, there is no such thing as a solitary Christian. Never can be, never will be. The very idea of such is a contradiction in terms. To be made one with Christ through His grace is to be made one also with all others who are in Christ through His grace. In the family God creates, we are all mothers and brothers and so forth to one another. And we ignore this, we turn away from this, we forget this at our great peril. Mother Theresa was once asked to diagnose the ills of our modern world. And this is what she said: "*We have forgotten that we belong to each other.*"²

We belong to each other, as well as to Christ, in the family God is creating through the hearing and doing of His Word.

But this family God creates is more than an unyielding theological truth, a Biblical foundation stone – it is also a tremendous gift which God gives to us for the living out of our lives in response to His Word. If a solitary Christian is first of all a theological impossibility, it is secondly a discipleship disaster in the making. Because the Christian life is not easy – it is the harder way, the narrow path, the bearing of a cross as Jesus put it.³ For that matter life itself, Christian or not, is not easy. And we need the help of others to make it through – we especially need the help of other Christians to make it through life as genuine, fruit-bearing disciples of Jesus Christ and His Word. We need the help of others to hear the Word of God in faith and true understanding, as well as help in putting that Word into practice faithfully in our daily lives.

That, I think, is what those three sayings which precede the story of Jesus and His mother and brothers are pointing us toward. Jesus speaks of light not being covered but rather shared. Of truth made manifest in our midst. And of how the more we are seeking to hear and to do His Word, the more will be added to the richness of our understanding and the joy of our journey through this family God creates. We are given by God the help of our brothers and sisters in the family God creates in order to stay ever more faithful in the way and the truth and the life Scripture reveals.

The Episcopalian preacher, Barbara Brown Taylor, has a succinct and lovely way of getting at this. She writes:

Everyone needs someone to tell her she has spinach in her teeth, preferably before she has spent 15 minutes wondering why her table companions are so taken with her smile. One friend recently crossed a gender boundary to help me with a similar problem lower down.

“XYZ,” he said, when we rose from eating lunch together.

“Huh?” I said.

“Examine your zipper,” he said, and he was right. The fly on my Eddie Bauer summer sale jeans was standing wide open. As embarrassed as I was, I was grateful to him for being direct with me. He not only saved me from exposing myself all the way back to my car but also from spending the rest of the afternoon wondering if he had noticed.

We all need help seeing what we do not see, which is one reason we practice faith in community . . . By joining us with those who have been broken in different places than we have, God offers us guides who can spot danger where we may not. By seating us at table with those who see us differently than we see ourselves, God makes sure we have someone to tell us to XYZ.⁴

It's just like Jesus taught us back in chapter six – that we need fellow Christians to help us get the log out of our eye, so that we can then help them get the speck out of theirs – the church as a mutual eye-cleaning fellowship!

But it's not just help in staying true to the way and the truth and the life that the family God creates can provide for us – it's also just plain help for us when life has turned hard or tragic or frightening for us. The light God has placed in us and in our fellowship shines even more brightly when the darkness comes. We are given others to help us find our way through the darkness, others to help us endure until the light of a better day begins to shine.

I was reading a while back a book full of stories of ordinary Presbyterians and ordinary Presbyterian churches. One of the stories was about Gene and Sue Hendrickson, members of a Presbyterian church in South Range, Wisconsin. Gene and Sue were not very active members of that church – more of the Christmas and Easter sort, to be honest. At least they were until tragedy struck their extended family. Ron's sister, brother-in-law and their two children all died in a plane crash. Since the sister and brother-in-law did not have a church home of their own, Sue asked her minister if he would handle the funeral service – which he readily agreed to do. Sue writes:

That is when we discovered the meaning of the church as a community of believers. It was like a great machine, and someone had thrown the switch, bringing it to life. Our brothers and sisters in the church helped us plan the funeral, prepared food for the reception, and stayed by our side the whole time. After the funeral and for weeks following, members continued to bring meals, take care of our children so that we could see to the details of the estate, and performed countless other acts of kindness for us. Every time we turned around it seemed someone was asking, "What can we do for you?" They didn't nourish us just with food for our bodies, but also with love, tenderness, and sympathy to heal our wounded spirits. For weeks it seemed as if we were held in a loving embrace.

And then she continues:

They say the word "evangelism" has "angel" in the middle for a good reason. Well, the people of our church reached out to us like angels . . . We don't just "attend" church now; we are truly involved. We look forward to sharing in the love of the Holy Spirit with the people who made such a difference in our lives. To us, the church is now a place for worship, fellowship, rejoicing, and caring.⁵

The family God creates. It's not just an inescapable theological fact about being a Christian. It is and ever can be the source of that light which enables us to find our way through the darkness. In which our belonging to one another in Jesus Christ is brought forward and made manifest. And through which we are given more than we could have imagined – of love, of companionship, of nurture, of support and guidance and correction. In and through the family God

creates of us – and for us – in Jesus Christ. Living resiliently cannot be done alone.⁶ So, God gives us one another in the family God creates. Living faithfully cannot be done alone. So, God gives us brothers and sisters to help in the family God creates.

And another thing: as we together live out our calling as the family God creates through the hearing and doing of His Word, we – as God’s family – become to this world around us that lamp set upon a stand. God using us to invite even more folks to come in, to join in, to become part of the family God creates.

¹ Ephesians 1:7-10, 11-22.

² Quoted in Gregory Boyle, Tattoos on the Heart (New York: Free Press, 2010), p. 187.

³ Matthew 7:13-14, 16:24-28

⁴ Barbara Brown Taylor, “Teaching contempt,” Christian Century, Vol. 121, No. 17 (August 24, 2004), p. 37.

⁵ Dirk Wierenga, Presbyterians: A Spiritual Journey (Louisville: Geneva Press, 2000), p. 11.

⁶ Gordon MacDonald, A Resilient Life (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 2004), p. 217.