

Who's Your Family?

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Matthew 12:46-49 — While Jesus was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his siblings were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, “Look, your mother and your siblings 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 siblings?” And pointing to his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my siblings!”

Jesus was a bad son. Seriously: by the standards of the Palestinian Jewish culture in which he was raised, Jesus fell terribly short of what a son was supposed to be. See, in order to be a good son in Jesus's society, you had to do at least three things that Jesus didn't do.

First, you had to get married and have children. This preserved your family's lineage and brought your family honor. What's more, it bolstered your family's economic welfare by forging an alliance between two families and by creating offspring who would, in time, contribute to the family's income. If you think there's social pressure *now* for people to get married, or if you think that there was social pressure to get married when you were growing up, that's nothing compared to what people experienced in biblical times. Back then, *everyone*—at least every decent person—got married and started a biological family. But not Jesus.

The second thing you had to do to be a good son was to stay put. In Jesus's society, families almost always lived together—if not under the same roof, then at least in very close proximity—so that family members could take care of each other when times got tough (as times often did in ancient, agrarian societies). And although Jesus stuck around his hometown of Nazareth for a while, working as a carpenter, contributing to his family's livelihood, by the time he hits his late 20s, early 30s, he doesn't stay put any longer; no, he starts gallivanting from town to town with a group of buddies, always on the move, always bringing controversy wherever they go. This was not a respectable lifestyle choice. On the contrary, it seemed downright irresponsible.

Lastly, in order to be a good son in Jesus's society, you had to financially support your parents and perhaps other older relatives as they aged. This is related to the whole notion of staying put: as family, you're supposed to take care of each other. And if Jesus had wanted to, he could have made a pretty penny, even as he was on the move. After all, he had crowds of people following him, adoring him (and abhorring him), talking non-stop about his controversial speeches and actions. There's always a fast buck to be made from a scandal. If Jesus had wanted to, he could have made money as an eccentric prophet and healer, could have used that money to support his family, like any good son would do—but he doesn't. In the Gospels, Jesus clearly tells his disciples that they are to own and spend as little as possible. So, throughout his renowned ministry, Jesus was intentionally poor—which meant that he failed to do what good sons were supposed to do in his culture.

All three of these things—getting married and having kids, staying put, making money to support your family—these were especially expected of a firstborn son. As the firstborn, Jesus was obligated to be the leader, the example-setter, the one who worked hardest to meet the expectations and standards that society set for families. But that’s not who Jesus was.

And this morning’s passage confirms it, in a rather shocking exchange. Here, Jesus is speaking to yet another crowd of people, when his mother and siblings stop by to speak with him. We don’t know why. Presumably, there’s a family matter that merits Jesus’s attention. Perhaps a loved one has become ill. Or perhaps it’s nothing serious, just something trivial—but regardless, the only decent thing for Jesus to do in this situation is for him to stop what he’s doing and go see what his family wants.

Instead, Jesus does the unthinkable: not only does he *not* honor their request to come and speak with them, but he appears to snub them: “Who is my mother, and who are my siblings?” he says. Now, if you were Jesus’s mom, Jesus’s brother, Jesus’s sister, how would you feel if you overheard those words? Shocking as this response is, it’s actually in line with Jesus’s decisions in recent years: deciding not to get married and have children, deciding not to stay put, deciding not to focus on financially supporting his biological kin. Apparently, by the time we get to this passage, Jesus had already decided to shake off society’s expectations and to do family differently.

I want to offer just two main points in reflection on this passage. First, as you can imagine, there was tension in Jesus’s family surrounding his decisions—surrounding his ministry in general. Chapter 3 of Mark’s Gospel shows us that Jesus’s family feared he was unstable, even possessed, early on in his healing ministry. Chapter 7 of John’s Gospel suggests that some of Jesus’s siblings taunted him, refusing to believe that he was anything special.

All of this familial tension began before Jesus was even born. When Mary got pregnant as a teenager while she was still engaged to Joseph, the couple became embroiled in a local scandal, which actually lived on into Jesus’s adulthood. In chapters 8 and 9 of John’s Gospel, some of Jesus’s opponents try to shame him for the circumstances under which he was born. No doubt, the stigma that his family had long endured compounded their tension and conflict over Jesus’s abnormal decisions.

In fact, all of this may have ultimately divided the family. Have you ever noticed that after Jesus’s childhood, Joseph—Mary’s husband—never shows up again in the Gospels? Not during Jesus’s ministry, not during his crucifixion, not anywhere. From Jesus’s young adulthood on, Joseph is absent. Tradition has taught that Joseph died by the time Jesus became an adult, although the text never tells us this. Picking up on clues throughout the Gospels, some scholars think it is just as likely that Joseph just left, that he abandoned his stigmatized family and their strained relations. But regardless, all of this goes to say: Jesus himself didn’t have “the perfect

family”—whatever that would look like. Even his family was familiar with tension and division, and it’s okay when our families are, too.

A second and final main point: Jesus invites us to redefine and to widen our understanding of family. I don’t think he’s trying to snub his mother and siblings in this passage; rather, I think he’s trying to get his followers to start imagining new, more expansive ways of being family. Given this, isn’t it a little ironic that so many Christians in this country have made such a fuss over the nuclear family in recent decades? There’s all of this rhetoric about protecting the traditional family, when it seems clear to me, from reading the Gospels, that Jesus was advocating for a very much *non*-traditional family. Jesus encourages us to envision family beyond biology. Jesus invites us to seek kinship not just based on blood, but based on the Spirit.

When I lived in Jordan, the boarding school for Deaf children where I worked would hold a Bible study every Tuesday night, attended by fifteen or so students. One night, around 10pm, as all of us are leaving the chapel, and as I’m escorting half a dozen boys back to their boarding house, a 13-year-old named Mohammed gives me a huge hug and jokes, “Carry me! Carry me back to the boarding house!” I laugh and sign, “You’re too old, and I’m too weak.” We all keep walking. A few seconds later, I feel a tug on my sleeve. I look down, and it’s Motassem, a 10-year-old boy with bright blue eyes. I sign, “What?” to him, and he just signs, “I’m only ten.”

It takes me a second to realize what he’s asking, and then another second or two for me to decide. I scoop him up, and he clings to me. Slowly, we make our way to the boys’ boarding house, around forty yards and forty stair-steps away. Besides a few short giggles, he is silent and still in my arms.

What kind of ten-year-old boy likes to be carried? The kind who wasn’t carried enough when he was three. The kind who is old enough to know that his biological father has failed him, but still young enough to delight in pretending with someone else.

Is there a Motassem in your life right now—someone whose biological family isn’t measuring up and who the Spirit might want to connect you with in Christian kinship? And maybe you feel a lot like Motassem these days. You feel like you need someone to carry you, even just for a few minutes. Who is your mother? Who are your siblings? Jesus is asking. And answering: “Here.” Amen.