

The 3rd Sunday after Pentecost
June 10, 2018
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

1 Samuel 8:4-20
Psalm 138
2 Corinthians 4:13—5:1
Mark 3:30-35

The Christian educator and priest John Westerhoff once described a baptism he had witnessed in a small Latin American church. The congregation had gathered that day, much as we will later today when we celebrate a baptism at our 10:15 service.

But then it was time for the baptism. And the congregation sang a surprisingly mournful hymn as a solemn procession began to move down the center aisle: first, the father, carrying a small coffin made he'd made himself; next, the mother, carrying a pitcher of water from the family well; and finally, the priest, carrying the sleeping infant wrapped only in a native blanket.

The father carried the wooden box up to the altar and placed it there. The mother poured the water into the empty coffin. And the congregation's singing softened to a whisper as the priest anointed the still-sleeping infant with oil. Then the priest lowered the child into the water, immersed the child's head in the water, and exclaimed, "I kill you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." The people responded with a loud, "Amen!"

And then the priest quickly lifted the child into the air for all to see, and declared, "And I raise you to new life that you might love and serve the Lord." And the congregation burst forth in singing a joyous Easter hymn.

I share that story to make the point that in baptisms we are given a new life, a new identity, a new birth into the larger family of God. This is not to say anything against our biological families, *per se*, except to say they're not big enough.

Jesus had a family. And they loved him. I take that as a given. Mark doesn't tell us much, hardly anything really about Jesus' family. (Matthew and Luke try to fill in that art of the story.) But it's a safe supposition that Jesus' family loved him; there's no reason for us to think otherwise, and there's every reason for us to suppose that their love shaped Jesus in love and for love, that their love taught him how to love others as he himself had been loved.

And there's every reason to suppose that for love's sake they went out to Jesus in this story we heard this morning. They'd been hearing stories, though it's hard to know exactly which stories they'd have heard. Stories about Jesus making people well? Perhaps. Stories about Jesus making the wrong sorts of friends ... and the wrong sorts of enemies, too? Undoubtedly.

People were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." Some of the older translations put it more delicately, saying, "He is beside himself." Some of the newer ones put it more bluntly: "When Jesus' family heard what he was doing, they thought he was crazy ..."

And so for love's sake, Jesus' family figured they should do something before things got out of hand. But it was already too late. They couldn't reach him when they arrived; there were too many people in the way. And the crowds were so demanding the day they got there that Jesus didn't even have time or space to eat. And though some folk said Jesus was crazy, the scribes went further and said that Jesus was in league with the devil.

And so, for love's sake, they seek to "restrain" Jesus.

It's an ominous way to put it. It could be translated as "seize." Restrain is, after all, precisely the same word used to describe the arrest of John the Baptist ... and the same word used, later, to describe the arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane as well. Whatever their respective reasons, both Jesus' family (who cared for Jesus) and the "powers-that-be" (who cared not at all for Jesus) try to "restrain" him. And I think it's clear that they would all agree that the solution would be for Jesus to rock the boat a bit less, for him to just be a bit more "normal."

The push to conform to what is deemed normal is writ deeply in us. Consider our first reading this morning. The people demand a king, which Samuel says is a bad idea. He tells them all the reasons why: kings will take your children will be taken from you, your sons to fight in wars or to work the fields and your daughters to be placed in the king's harem or in the king's kitchen; they'll take your fields and your crops and your wealth, and give them to others. A king will make slaves of you all, Samuel tells them. (And there's more than a little foreshadowing here.)

But the people refuse to listen. They are resolved. They want a king. And why? "we are determined to have a king over us," they say, "*so that we also may be like other nations.*" They wanted to be normal, utterly missing the point that God wanted them to be exceptional.

It begs the question of who's really crazy in these stories. Jesus for being Jesus? Or God's people for aspiring to be nothing more than predictably – and tragically – normal?

In this morning's gospel, we hear about a time when Jesus' family came and essentially say to him, "*Why be Jesus when you could be normal?*" But he wouldn't have been Jesus if he'd have been normal. If he'd have been normal after all, he would have been content to preserve the status quo, to work to maintain the rules that safeguard the established order, to be satisfied with a narrow circle of family and friends. But Jesus came to proclaim a new dream for this world, to break through the all that diminishes us, to draw in a much wider family – one that includes even the likes of you and me.

For love's sake, Jesus' family try to restrain Jesus. This I believe. They want him to be normal, no doubt mistakenly believing it will make everyone happy. It would certainly make the authorities happy. And protecting the family name would make the family itself happy, of course. And I'd like to give them the benefit of the doubt and think that they sincerely wanted Jesus himself to be happy, as well, and so they wanted what to have a respectable place among respectable society, a family of his own someday, loved ones with whom he could share love.

For love's sake, they try to restrain Jesus. They'd hardly be the only family, then or any time down through the ages, to make the same terrible mistake. It's a sobering truth to recall in the month of June, when so many of our LGBTQ sisters and brothers are celebrating Pride month. For love's sake, families have too-often tried to restrain their children from being the people God made them to be. It's a love that does not free them to be themselves, but constricts. It's a love that smothers them rather than give new breath and life. (And the same has undoubtedly been true for all sorts of folk who don't fit in or measure up to what others define as normal.)

I want to give Jesus' family the benefit of the doubt. And so I choose to believe that for love's sake, they try to restrain Jesus that day. But it's for *LOVE's* sake, of course, that Jesus breaks free of those restraints. He looks around at the people gathered around him and sees in each of them – and in all of them – a family resemblance, and he feels for them – and all of us – a familial affection.

Jesus' family loved him. They taught him he was beloved and how to love. And in this moment he teaches them – and us – the full measure of God's love, a love not limited to kinfolk but to all kinds of folk, love not defined by genetics or geography but by the wideness of God's mercy.

A baptism is an excellent reminder of all of this. I've instructed Charlotte and the godparents that they should formally present the candidate for Holy Baptism by his first name only. It's a minor detail, but I try always to emphasize it. For in baptism, we will say that Ethan's last name is Christian, and he is adopted as Christ's own forever. (And so are all of us.)

We've heard the old expression that blood is thicker than water. Well, in baptism we say the opposite, that water is actually thicker than blood. And we put words to that contrary position in the promises we make every time we renew our baptismal covenant. We promise to proclaim the good news of God's love for **all** people in **everything** we say and do. We promise to seek and serve Christ in **all** persons. We promise to strive for justice and peace among **all** people. We promise to respect the dignity of **every** human being. And, yes, as Jesus insisted was the most important thing, we promise to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

It's not complicated. And it's not easy either. And certainly it's not normal. No, the normal thing is for us to reserve our love mostly for a smaller circle of friends and family, for those who look like and act like us and think like us. But as members of a much larger family, we are challenged to love anyone and everyone.

Which is why we need to be reminded from time to time, as our Presiding Bishop recently did most recently at the Reclaiming Jesus march in Washington, D.C., putting it this way:

Love the neighbor you like, and the neighbor you don't like. Love the neighbor you agree with, and the neighbor you don't agree with. Love your Democrat neighbor, your Republican neighbor, your black neighbor, your white neighbor, your Anglo neighbor, your Latino, your LGBTQ neighbor, love your neighbor. That's why we're here.



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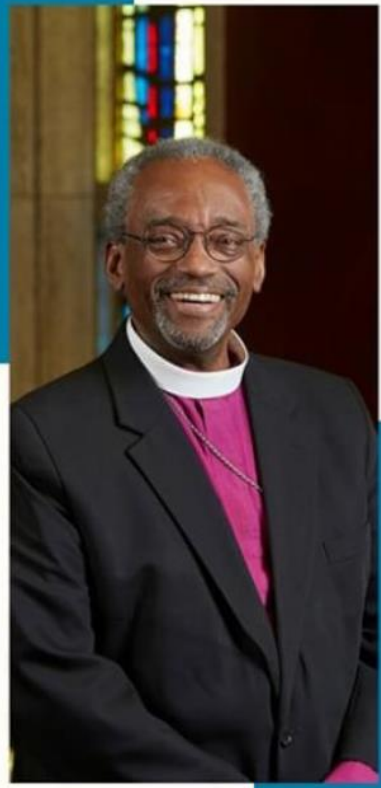


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#RECLAIMINGJESUS

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Presiding Bishop Michael Curry, The Episcopal Church



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