

Jesus and the Family
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
March 6, 2022 – AM Service
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Mark 3:20-21, 31-35

As we do every year in the season of Lent, we will follow Jesus as he goes to the cross. We will pick up our cross and follow him. And this year we will spend lent in the Gospel of Mark and as we watch Jesus approach the cross, we will look at how human institutions interact with Jesus. In every society there are human institutions that we rely on to help build our lives. I'm thinking of institutions like the family, the government, the church. Mark shows Jesus coming into contact with all of these institutions. How do those encounters go? What do they tell us about these institutions? What do they teach us about Jesus and our relationship with him? Today's institution: the family. We will read a passage from Mark where Jesus interacts with home and family. Read Mark 3:21-22, 31-35.

Every church I have ever seen, works really hard to be family friendly. Every church I have ever known want to send the message: "*We are a family friendly church! Your family can find a home here! We will support your family! We will love your kids!*" LaGrave is no exception. We spend a lot of energy on our young people and on our families. Pre-covid, when things were running fully, Bob estimates that about 130 volunteers were working in our youth programs. Every church wants young families in their pews and the very last thing any church wants to hear is, "your church is not very family friendly."

That's why it's jarring to go through the gospels and watch Jesus interact with the institution of the family. Churches may always be warm towards families. Churches may always work hard to accommodate families. Jesus's relationship with the family is more complicated. Like in our passage. Jesus has been teaching for a little while and he's started to become controversial. He's challenged traditional Sabbath observance, he's implied that he has the authority to forgive sins, he's made the religious leaders angry, he's upsetting the traditional order of things. It's so bad that some people are saying, "He's out of his mind! He's possessed!" His family hears about it and they come to 'take charge of him.' They are going to stage an intervention. They are going to take him to Pine Rest to have him evaluated.

When they arrive for their intervention, Jesus is teaching inside a house full of disciples. He's talking about the kingdom of God. The room is a bright circle of eager faces leaning towards him. Their eyes shine. Their hearts are open. It's like he is speaking right to their souls. Jesus' words are going all the way down. The room is electric. The intensity of the moment is broken when the owner of the house steps into the room and clears his throat, "*Ahh, sorry to interrupt Jesus, but your Mom is here. And so are your brothers. They want you to come with them right now.*"

That's a weighty summons. In that culture, if your family called you, you listened. 'Honor your Father and your mother.' It's one of the ten commandments. And the Proverbs are full of wise saying calling us to listen to your Mom. Proverbs 1:8 'Listen, my son, to your father's instruction and do not forsake your mother's teaching.' Proverbs 6:2 'My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching.' Proverbs 10:1 'A wise son brings joy to his father, but a foolish son brings grief to his mother.' There is tremendous weight behind this family summons. But Jesus doesn't come. Jesus stops, he looks around at the disciples seated in front of him and he says, "*Mothers and brothers? What are you talking about? Here are my*

Mothers and brothers. Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.” It's an astonishing refusal. Mark paints a striking picture. The new family, Jesus and his disciples inside the house, one together in heart and mind. His nuclear family outside the house, knocking at the door, and turned away.

And this isn't the only time Jesus says stuff like this! Matthew 10: *“Do not suppose I have come to bring peace to the earth. No I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother in law – a man's enemies will be the members of his own household.”* Matthew 19:29, *“Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive as hundred times as much and will receive eternal life.”* Then there's Luke 9 where a man asks if he can say goodbye to his family before following and Jesus says, *“Nope. No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God.”* This story is not an isolated incident; it's part of a pattern. What is going on here? Is Jesus not family friendly? Is Jesus anti-family? What do we make of Jesus' behavior in this passage?

Let me start by stating what I hope is the obvious: Jesus is not anti-family. The family is an institution created, ordered and blessed by God. That goes all the way back to the first chapters of Genesis. It is not good for man to be alone, so God creates a wife for him. The two become one and they are called to be fruitful and multiply. The family is born, and from that point on, the family becomes one of the main tools for God's purposes. When God initiates his covenant plan for renewing the world, he does it through a family. He calls Abraham's family. When God sends his laws to Moses on Mount Sinai, those laws are full of provisions for the protection and support of families. The Psalmist says, Sons and daughters are a heritage from the Lord! Families are a good, God-created, God-supported institution.

The institution of the family is designed for two things, probably more than two things, but at least these two things. Formation. The family is the first line of formation. Our families surround us at our most impressionable age, so their words, their habits, the way they handle conflict, the rituals they practice, all have an enormous impact on who we are. That's why scripture makes formation a central task of families. Deuteronomy 6 – teach your children these laws! And tell them the stories of what I've done. Proverbs - raise your children in the fear of the Lord. Teach them discipline and industry and kindness, and kids, listen to your parents. Proverbs 22:6 – “Start children off on the way they should go, and even when they are old they will not turn from it.” God created our families to be the first line of formation.

Families are also for intimacy. There's a kind of intimacy that's completely unique to family. You hear that unique intimacy in phone calls. You can always tell when someone is on the phone with a family member. Compare these two conversations: *“Hello. Hiiii! How are you! It's so good to hear from you! How's everything going. Good. Good Oh that's hilarious. Tuesday, no, um, no sorry I can't on Thursday, sorry about that. I'd love to get together sometime though. Well thanks for calling! Bye.”* Now this conversation. *“O Hi. What's up. Tuesday. No I can't. There's no way. No I have a meeting! Yeah I know. Yeah I heard about that. Look I'm really busy we'll talk later. Ok Bye.”* Which of those two phone calls was with a family member? It's obvious, right? It's the second one. Why do we know that? Because there's an immediacy to the communication. The person on the other end of the line knows me so well, I don't have to honey the conversation with niceties. There are no masks, the feelings are right there. Family relations are uniquely intimate which makes them uniquely powerful. If that intimacy is met with kindness gentleness and love, something beautiful happens. If that intimacy is met with manipulation, selfishness and anger, you get a soul-deep wound.

So when it is working the way it's supposed to, the family is a beautiful institution full of intimacy and formative power. For many of us, not all of us, but for many of us, our families are an enormous source of joy and strength. And it's precisely because families are so strong and good that Jesus says hard things about them. Because when a created thing is really strong and really good and really wonderful it makes a really good idol. An idol is a good created thing that we put at the center of our life instead of God and his kingdom. The family is absolutely one of the best things God has created, so it makes one of the best idols. There are whole religions that make family the object of worship. That's what ancestor worship is – the idolization of the family. Traditional Chinese religion is centered around the worship of ancestors and their traditions. Offerings are made to dead ancestors. Other religions have family shrines where the dead are remembered and prayed to. Is family sometimes an idol in modern American culture? Absolutely. As religious practice has faded, family practice and family ritual has taken its place. There are lots of people for whom the life and happiness and well-being of their family is their object of ultimate concern, and for the sake of family happiness they would give their life their soul their all.

Family is a wonderful institution, it's a great support, but it makes a lousy foundation. Because families are made up of humans and humans fail. They let us down. Families disappoint us. They are an unsteady place to rest your hopes. They are a wonderful support, but they are a lousy foundation. In Christ alone my hope is found! Jesus says these hard things because he's trying to make sure that your hope is placed where it's supposed to be – on the solid rock of Jesus.

We said that the family is a tool for formation and intimacy. Jesus is the foundation of formation and intimacy. Jesus is the one who will finally form you and make you the person you want to be. Jesus went to the cross so that we could be formed into new creations. He was so determined that we should be made new that he shed his blood to wash away our sins, he gave his life to break the hold of evil in us. Now our new selves already exist. They are up in heaven. They are hidden with God in Christ. When you belong to Jesus you are slowly being changed from one degree of glory to the next and nothing can prevent you from being completely transformed. The family is a tool for that formation; Jesus is the foundation of that formation.

Jesus is also the foundation of intimacy and love. When you belong to Jesus and you are in relationship to him, there is no deeper intimacy than the intimacy you have with him. You tell him all your stuff. You are constantly calling out to him, talking to him, wrestling with him. He knows your deepest stuff, he sees into your darkest places and into those places he pours love and light. The family is an amazing tool for love, but Jesus is the foundation of love.

Furthermore, when your hopes are founded on Christ alone, your relationship with your family is better. Jesus is not calling you to push your family away. He's not saying spend less time with your wife. He's not telling you to ignore your parents. When he is the foundation, your family relationships take on their proper perspective! They get better. If your life is founded on Jesus, it's easier to forgive your parents for their imperfections. Maybe you had a distant father. He was too busy with his own stuff to really get to know you. That hurts. If family is your idol it doesn't just hurt, it's shattering. But if your life is founded on Jesus and you have that deep relationship with him, you have a source of unconditional love that sustains you and allows you to love your dad despite his failures.

If your family life is founded on Jesus, you are free from the tyranny of perfect parenting. That's a thing. Parents today feel enormous pressure to give their children a perfect upbringing. To shield them from pain. To give them just the right foods. To give them just the right

experiences. To say the right thing in every circumstance, so that your child will be successful, morally upright and perfectly kind. Good luck with that. You are called to love your child and form them. But you are not your child's foundation or their savior. Jesus is their foundation. Jesus is their savior. That's what we say at the baptismal font. Love your child, love your grandchildren well, but don't fall into the perfect parent trap. You aren't their savior. Jesus is.

If Jesus is your foundation you have a place to stand if your family completely falls apart. Because that happens too. Sometimes a family dynamic is just toxic. Instead of intimacy there's abuse, instead of formation there's neglect, or control. This institution that God created for good fails you. Without Jesus you have no place to stand, but in him, in his community, in his family, there is a place to stand. A place where you are not defined by the toxicity of your home, a place where you are defined by your place in this home. By the beloved person you are in Christ.

When Jesus is at the center, you get your family back - healthy, ordered, held. So to get ourselves properly ordered, let's get ourselves centered. Come to the table – the family table. Let's receive the eternal food of grace. And let's remember where our hope is found.

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