

A few years ago, just after James was born, Ella and I were riding our bikes over to the Catholic Church where she went to school. By the end of this vignette, you will be able to tell that she had been going to catholic school and that she had been paying attention. She and I were having the time of our lives on our bike ride, and I think I asked her who the best daughter in the whole world was, and I told her she was. And then she asked me who the best dad in the whole world was and she said I was. So I asked her who the best brother was in the whole world, and remember he was young so there was no guarantee what she might say, but she said James was. Then I asked her who the best mother was in the whole world, and she didn't miss a beat. Mary, the mother of Jesus! I almost fell off my bike.

Mary doesn't get that honor in our gospel reading today, does she? Something is wrong and Jesus isn't too keen on his family, and he says those who do the will of God, those are his mothers and brothers and sisters.

Family. Family is one of the foundational images in the Bible. Before there are tribes and nations, Genesis begins with a story about families. Big families. Old families. Dysfunctional families. They kill and trick and forgive and sometimes sell each other into slavery. They get old and their sons don't follow their ways. I always think of the actual stories of the bible when I hear people on television talking about biblical family values.

Family is also one of the foundational metaphors for how we are to understand ourselves in relationship to God. There are others, of course: king and subjects, master and slaves, but I suspect the enduring one is of sons and daughters of God. Like children, we bring God both joy and consternation, but there is always a place for us at the table. Coming home to God and God's Kingdom is like finding a place at your parents' table. It's a Eucharistic image. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs from under thy table, but thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore gracious Lord, so to eat and to drink...

But leaving that table and going out into the world, I think that is also a word about family. I imagine that the table is designed with a little place card that says, welcome home. You are family, you belong here. You are loved tremendously, whatever has happened out there. But that isn't what the sign says as you are going out. To borrow an image from our gospel reading today, I suspect it says plainly, painted below the exit sign as you head out, always remember, these are your mothers and brothers and sisters.

Something like that was the message of Jesus, how sitting at his table in the Kingdom of God will always change the way that you think of family. In our gospel reading today, Jesus is frustrated with his family, or better said, they are frustrated with him. Perhaps they are worried about him. Perhaps they know that he is moving into uncharted territory that could get him into trouble. And that, I think, is what he meant at first when he said who are my mothers and brothers and sisters? He was frustrated with them.

But then he goes on to repeat himself. He answers the question, moving from initial frustration to a larger point, his enduring message, of what it means to be a child of God. To be a child of God is to see beyond immediate circumstances and frustration, and to see in all times and in all places mothers and brothers and sisters of God, especially in the most unlikely of places.

You remember how that happened for Jesus. There is a story about how a woman had been sick for years, hemorrhaging, and she was unclean and shouldn't have come near him, but when no one was looking she made a mad dash for him and grabbed the hem of his robe. And Mark's gospel says his power went out from him and he looked around to see what had happened and everyone around him gasped. And he looked down into her terrified face—suddenly rosier, I guess—and he called her, daughter. Daughter, he said, your faith has healed you, go in peace.

There is another story about a Canaanite woman who was a foreigner. She wasn't Jewish, and that is what Jesus told her when she asked for her daughter to be healed. And Jesus at first said no, he kind of called her a dog and he said he had come to feed the children of Israel. And she said yes, she understood, but don't the dogs often gather up the crumbs from under the table. She would gather the crumbs. And he said he hadn't seen faith like this in any of the children of Israel, and he realized that the two of them shared in this mysterious bond of faith, and he healed her daughter.

There is another story about Jesus in his darkest hour. He was dying on the cross and most of his followers had deserted him. Above his head they put a sign, a belittling sign, kind of like a place card for someone you don't want at your feast. "King of the Jews," it said, in Hebrew and Latin and Greek. While he was dying, the thief next to him asked him for one favor. Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom. He was a criminal, and I suspect most who knew Jesus knew that this man was unworthy of the Kingdom of God. But that isn't

what Jesus said. He said, today you will be with me in paradise.

Imagine the scene, the two of them limping into paradise together on crucified feet, the criminal and Jesus arm, in crucified arm, parading into the Kingdom of God! And the God and Father of us all says hello son. And he pointed him to his place at the table, where the card no longer said derogatorily King of the Jews, but it said triumphantly "The firstborn of many brothers and sisters." And then I imagine God having said to him, I see you have brought someone with you. And Jesus looked back at him, having learned the lesson of his ravaged humanity, and he said with a twinkle in his eye, "oh Dad, there are going to be a lot more where he came from!"

That is the story of our salvation, isn't it? How we do not come to this table trusting in our own righteousness, but how also we have been persuaded by Christ and his gospel that God does not see us that way. Remember the words I told you are painted over the door. That is what I imagine God sees. He looks at us, and he sees us like

the penitent thief draped across the loving arms of Jesus with words over our heads, and the words say simply, these are your mothers and brothers and sisters. They are family now.

And we are supposed to believe that about ourselves. And each time we leave this banquet, we are expected to see those same words that God has seen in us.

I remember a few summers ago, when ISIS was on the offence, and people were petrified but also somewhat apathetic, I was at Westminster Abbey, and the preacher talked about the Yazidis who were being ravaged by ISIS. That weekend, famously, a group of them were trapped on top of a mountain in the summer sun, trying to escape, dying without food and water. And the young priest reminded us that the Yazidis were a people who traced their own heritage to the time and place of Jesus, and that they still spoke Aramaic, the language of Jesus. And he said simply, at the end of his sermon, something that followed me that whole summer. These, he said, these are your mothers and brothers and sisters.

Later that summer, a white supremacist went into a bible study at Charleston's Mother Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, and he killed nine people at the oldest AME church in the South. And we all wondered what to make of that kind of senseless tragedy. And I remember the words of our gospel as I thought of those nine lost souls. These are our mothers and our brothers and sister.

That same summer, the Syrian civil war was raging and masses of people were trying to escape. You remember Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old boy whose body washed up onto the beach after the boat carrying his family sank. And his death, it seemed to me, helped many of us to think differently about those people, even if only for a moment. They were our mothers and brothers and sisters.

The other day, I saw an article about our nation's newest policy of separating parents from their children and holding them in facilities where they do not know if

the others have survived. One of those facilities was an abandoned Wal-Mart, and it will be the newest place to hold these people separated parent from child. Walmart was worried about the negative publicity, so even though the sign was gone, they pained over what remained of the sun-soaked logo.

That means there is now room for something else to be painted over it. I suggest some simple words of Christ and his gospel to go over those doors. They are words of family. They are words of redemption and grace. And they are the words, I believe, that are already painted above the portals in the banquet hall of the Kingdom of God. Maybe we could paint them on detention halls where parents and children are separated. These are your mothers and brothers and sisters.