

Family Relationships and The Gospel

August 19, 2007

Rev. Nathaniel R. Elliot, Jr

There's a story of a young monk returning to the monastery with some supplies who came to a stream. As he began crossing over, his donkey became startled and bucked him off headlong into the cold water. Coming up out of the water breathless and shivering, he looked up to heaven and yelled, *Do you always treat your friends like this?* Waiting a moment and getting no answer, the monk muttered under his breath, *No wonder you have so few of them.*

After hearing the teaching from Jesus for this Sunday, about bringing fire on the earth, about bringing division and not peace, about breaking families apart every which way, you wonder how he, too, had any friends at all. In a world sold on *networking* and *family channels* and *solidarity* and *family values*, (Lk. 12:49-53) Jesus sounds not only harsh, but also way out of step with the traditional values that *built America.*

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Throughout his short ministry, Jesus appears to be the family iconoclast extraordinaire. *Let the dead bury their own dead* (Mt. 8:22), he tells a would-be disciple who declines followership until he can see his aging father safely into the grave. And what about the fifth commandment in the Decalogue: *Honor your father and your mother* (Ex. 20:12)? This is one of the revolutionary advances in the moral understanding of primitive cultures, i.e. to care for those who can no longer produce for themselves *or* society. Jesus is tough.

But, there's more. A crowd gathers around Jesus so thickly that Mark says the disciples *could not even eat* (3:20). His mother and his brothers became concerned and so they had Jesus paged (v.21). He responded, *who are my mother and my brothers* v. 33). Before they can respond, Jesus tells those around him, *Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the*

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will of God, is my brother and sister and mother (Mk. 3:34-35).

Then, if there is any doubt left about the tension between family relationships and Gospel truth, the passage for today ends it. Jesus declares: *From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three; they will be divided: father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law* (Lk. 12:52-53).

Why this focus of Jesus on the family? The truth is the Jews themselves had focused on the family and for good reason. A family was more than a collection of people with the same blood who occupied a common dwelling. It constituted the smallest social unit of the clan or tribe. It formed the nucleus of society and

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provided the primary way Jewish society transmitted its cultural and moral values. The family also offered an indispensable context for protection, support, and economic viability, all critical needs for the development of competent, caring human beings. The blessing of this is that the family formed the *primary worshipping* unit.

The question is *what did Jesus mean?* Has Christian history followed the way Jesus imagined and predicted here? Clearly not. While history repeatedly reveals the Church at the giving end of division and violence, Jesus put himself on the receiving end of these things. The authentic Christian history on that score is Jesus' history, a history in which the words for today are a preamble to *suffering*, not privilege.

As it turns out, the division Jesus comes to bring is *the division he came to suffer*. It is a profound reversal of meaning in the cause of eventual peace. When Jesus

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says division begins with him, he means it. He opens himself to being torn apart from and by life's normal connections, none more natural in his day than family. Jesus nowhere rejects his mother or brothers; quite the contrary. But, as both the herald, and later first fruit of a new family, Jesus calls people out and into new life identities in this family of God, the *powerful* instrument of God's peace.

Yet the family, like all human powers resists its own redemption, which is why there is division. As with money, so with family we cannot serve two masters. We cannot juggle two identities. We must choose, and in families, the choice is sometimes made for us.

The prospect of God's rule, according to Jesus, is worth sacrifice. In Jerusalem he sacrifices himself to the powers of this world, and their fury, *including* that of family, to make possible God's rule in them. The conclusion is that one can live under that rule only

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apart from money or family. Rather, it is that one can serve God only in transformed relationships to both of them.

When we are converted by the Holy Spirit to Jesus and when we then begin to see the world as God sees it, we become aware of something truly profound. We experience *grace*. We become aware that we are loved by God *in spite of*. We realize that the Holy One loves us in a way similar to the way the sun shines, *unconditionally*, without reference to whether or not the planet earth *deserves* to be shined upon or not. It is a gift. A free gift.

But, it is a gift that creates in us an *in kind* response. Our heart turns to flesh in the sunlight of the Spirit. Our eyes soften. We begin to see others as they truly are....as children sinners who are loved by God *in spite of*.

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As the *mind of Christ* deepens in us, the perimeter of what is viewed as *family* widens accordingly. We desire to care for *sisters* and *brothers* who are outside the *genetic circle*. We desire to work for their development, their satisfaction, and their security, as much as we would work for our own.

To love others with our limited resources, without exclusion or judgment, puts us in tension with those who lay first claim, or exclusive claim, to that love. So, the Gospel brings peace *and* a sword. When unconditional love meets limited resources, sparks fly. For that reason, *the family of the Spirit* will always be in tension with the *biological family*. Until the Lord comes again, it will be a tension all Gospel believers, and their families, will have to live with.

AMEN.