

“Whoever Does the Will of God” by Deborah Sokolove

10 June 2012

The 3rd Sunday After Pentecost

In today's Gospel reading, we have been dumped into the middle of a story. All through the Easter season, and on through Pentecost and Trinity Sundays, we've been reading mostly from John. Today, suddenly, we are in the third chapter of Mark, where we hear that Jesus is being followed around by such large crowds that from time to time he has to get on a boat or climb up a mountain, just to have time to have a bite to eat or stop to listen to what God is saying to him.

Everything happens pretty quickly in Mark's version of the story. The book begins not with angelic announcements of the birth of Jesus, but with his baptism in the Jordan River at the hands of John, who has appeared in the desert out of nowhere. No mention that they might have been cousins.

In the next verse, we are told that Jesus spends the next forty days in the wilderness, no complicated conversations with Satan, no invitation to turn stones into bread, just the bare facts that he was faced with temptation and the angels took care of him. The verse after that informs us that John has been arrested, and Jesus appears in Galilee, saying, “The reign of God is at hand! Change your hearts and minds, and believe this Good News!”[Mark 1:15]

This is followed by a series of short vignettes in which Jesus claims the power to forgive the sins of a paralyzed person, eats dinner with tax collectors and other shady characters, talks about the danger of patching old garments with new cloth and filling old wineskins with new wine, and allows his disciples to break the Sabbath rules by picking grain as they walk along beside the fields. Then, as if to add insult to injury, he picks another fight with the authorities by healing a person who has a withered hand right there in front of them, in the synagogue on the Sabbath.

So, when he gets to his home town, it is no wonder that his relatives think he has lost his mind and the authorities are saying that he is possessed. Arriving at the house where he is staying, his distraught family asks someone to let Jesus know they want to see him. But he rejects this claim on him, saying that the people sitting around him are his family.

No wonder his family thought he was crazy. Wouldn't yours? Or, wouldn't you, if one of your relatives started acting like that?

Jesus, of course, lived about two thousand years ago, in a society very different from ours. But then, as now, family was a loaded concept, carrying with it a great many expectations, obligations, and complications. And then, as now, families—and their individual members—often did not live up to the idealized picture that the word “family” might conjure up.

Today, for some, the only legitimate family is composed of a man and a woman who are married to one another, and their

biological or legally adopted children. When pressed, people who hold this definition will agree to a somewhat more expansive definition, including an assortment of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and in-laws, as long as there is the right kind of biological or legal connection.

For others, a family is any group of people who claim to be one, regardless of biological or legal ties and regardless of the gender of any of the adults. Gay and lesbian couples, households with more than two adults who are devoted to one another, single parents living with any assortment of minor and adult children, and any number of other configurations make up families, and probably always have. In all of these, the common denominator is neither biology nor law, but mutual caring and long-term promises.

For many of us, our families of origin were not picture-perfect, loving havens. Some people's parents left because of war or serious illness, or even died when they were very young. Some people's parents divorced or separated for other reasons, or were alcoholic or depressed or psychotic. Some people were abused, physically or emotionally or both. Some were abandoned or thrown out of their homes.

Family is problematic in adulthood, too. Among us, there are stories of multiple divorces and complicated custody arrangements, children given up for adoption, children who have died, adult children who refuse contact with their parents, children and grandchildren who live so far away that contact is difficult and sporadic. Some have simply lived so long that no one is left alive from our families of origin. Others have stormy relationships with siblings, aged parents who have lost their memory, unmet expectations, shattered

dreams, and fractured relationships on every side. Real families are rarely ideal.

The people who were attracted to Jesus and the Good News that he proclaimed were the outsiders, the outliers, the ones for whom traditional structures like family didn't work. Tax collectors, lepers, people with withered hands or shady pasts. They may have had terrible childhoods, or they may have fallen on hard times in adulthood. Or, maybe they just found that, no matter how hard they tried, they didn't fit into the structures that life offered for them. Even in the best of families, the best of societies, sometimes someone is simply a bad fit, like the bookish kid in a family of jocks, or the one who keeps asking deep questions in a group that is content with easy, spiritual answers.

I think it is these situations that Jesus has in mind when he offered a different definition of family. Jesus says, "Anyone who does the will of God, that person is my sister, my brother, my mother." [Mark 3:34-35, Inclusive Bible] The family of Jesus is bound neither by law and biology, nor by individual promises to one another, but by a common commitment to follow Jesus and do the will of God.

Churches, I think, are supposed to be that kind of family. Not a family of biology or law, but of common commitment to doing the will of God as best as we can understand what that might mean. And, just as different individuals are called to different tasks, different churches live out their commitment to God's will in different ways.

Here at Seekers, I think that we are called to offer a home for misfits. Mostly, I think that the people who are attracted to Seekers, the ones who stay, are the ones who were bad fits somewhere else—in our families, our communities, our schools, the faith communities in which we grew up. Like the people who gathered around Jesus, some of us are economically comfortable while others struggle financially. Some of us are highly educated and some never finished school. Some of us fit the societal expectations around gender and some struggle to define our social identities in different ways. But, having heard a lot of stories in my 20+ years at Seekers, I think that I can safely say that all of us are marginal in some way, even if that way is not easily visible to others.

For many years, I carried in my mind's eye an image of Seekers as a kind of life raft floating through stormy waters, in which survivors of a bunch of different shipwrecks somehow have found one another. Each of us is so grateful to have been rescued that we work hard together to keep the rickety, awkward, patched together thing afloat. Sometimes we argue about what direction to head, but mostly we just paddle like crazy, hoping that someday we will get to shore, or at least find calmer waters.

Actually, not all of us paddle. Some folks bail, to keep us from sinking. Some folks cook whatever they find that is nourishing, so that we don't all starve. Some of us try to chart a course by looking at the stars and watching the currents. Some of us strike up a song that lifts our spirits and keeps us going when we tire. Some of us raise a hand-made flag as a signal and a message of hope to any other vessel that might be just over the horizon. Some check to make sure that no one has been swept away by the latest wave. And some sit on the edge of the raft with their legs dangling in the

water, reaching out a hand to whoever is swimming by, inviting them to come on board and catch their breath for a bit before handing them an oar.

Now, I don't want to idealize Seekers any more than I do some fantasy version of the family, nuclear or otherwise. We have our share of misunderstandings, disappointments, and other problems. From time to time, someone has even left in a huff, feeling that their particular gifts and talents have been rejected or that their voices weren't heard. Others seem happy to be on board at first, but after resting a while and healing from their struggle with the waves, they dive back into the sea in search of something else.

Ok, I think I may have stretched this metaphor about as far as it will go without tearing a hole in its raggedy sail. What I am trying to say is that, for many of us, for me, Seekers is the kind of family that Jesus was talking about. We try to follow Jesus, to hear his voice cajoling us and comforting us and teaching us, and yes, sometimes chastising us when we mistreat one another or forget that God is always with us, even when the storm rages and threatens to wash us overboard.

Like any big, noisy, busy family, everyone has a chore (or two, or three, or ten) but if someone is sick or in pain, we make sure that they get the rest, resources, and comfort they need in order to heal.

Like any big, noisy, busy family, sometimes someone feels hurt, or forgotten, or left out, but we forgive one another and try not to do it again.

Like any big, noisy, busy family, there is always room for one more at the dinner table, but if someone doesn't like the food, we continue to love them as we bless them on their way.

Unlike most families, however, we are committed not simply to one another, but to the Good News that the reign of God is already in us and among us and around us, but not just for us, but for the healing of the world.

The reign of God is at hand! As the sisters and brothers of Jesus, let us change our hearts and minds, and believe this Good News!