

## God's Chosen Family

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The Rev. Amanda Gerken-Nelson

There is something about this morning's gospel that is simultaneously wildly uncomfortable and radically comforting at the same time.

It has kind of an odd start, but Jesus is in the early stages of his ministry here but he is definitely at the stage where what he's saying and doing is getting a lot of attention

a "crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat" Mark says – they came to listen and to witness and Jesus was out there in the midst of him

Worried and concerned for their loved one, Jesus' family tries to go out and "restrain him" Mark says, can't you just hear his mother "Jesus, you come inside right now, your father's trying to work in his workshop and the people are getting in the way!"

The religious authorities drop by, too, and they, too, try to restrain him "Please, Mary and Joseph, remind your kid where his place is"

Jesus rebukes both of them, teaching in parables and scoffing at their apparent ignorance to who he is and what he's doing

The next part seems to take place a beat or two later, Jesus isn't within earshot or arm's distance to hear his family or to be restrained – rather he's amongst the crowd

Some in the crowd point out that his mother and brothers and sisters are trying to get his attention to which Jesus says "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Remember, at the beginning of my sermon I mentioned that there is something about this morning's gospel that is simultaneously wildly uncomfortable and radically comforting at the same time?

I think this text is wildly uncomfortable for some of us who cannot fathom the kind of rejection Jesus seems to be making to his family, to his *mother* of all people!

I think this text can be radically comforting for some of us for whom chosen family members are the closest thing to kin we've ever experienced.

Whether it be because of conflict, tragedy, distance, abandonment, or whatever the reason may be, for some of us chosen family have provided the love, care, nurture, and companionship that our nuclear families never could

So, I really think it's possible that reading this text could evoke discomfort or comfort depending on where we find ourselves

Jesus' comment – "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" – adds a dimension to this, too,

It's in churches that we often refer to each other as our brothers, sisters, and siblings in Christ

Churches are often described as "like a family"

Often, the description is used in a positive way – "we are like a family in how we love each other" – and sometimes it's more symbolic – "we are all part of God's family!"

But, I think it's worth asking ourselves periodically: if we use this story of Jesus as a model and metaphor, which family are we? Are we the family

trying to restrain Jesus and bring him back inside? Or are we the family gathered at Jesus' feet?

I'd like to tell you a story to illustrate my point.

You recall I've mentioned that prior to being called to be your Priest in Charge, I served as the Executive Director of Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries (ELM)

ELM is an organization that organizes and advocates for LGBTQIA+ seminarians and clergy in the Lutheran church and it has its genesis in the late 80's and early 90's in California

There is a Lutheran seminary in Berkeley – the one I attended – and in the late 80's there were four young men, all sons of the Lutheran church and tradition, who were nearing completion of their seminary studies and looking forward to their ministries except for one thing: they were gay and gay people weren't allowed to serve the church unless they agreed to be celibate.

The four of them decided to attend the 1987 March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights – this was the second such march and it was an incredible success with upwards 200,000 people attending

It was at this march that the famous AIDS quilt was first displayed

On the plane ride back to Berkeley, the four friends – moved and motivated by their experience in Washington – decided that they couldn't stand to serve a church that wouldn't accept them fully for who they were

They refused to promise to remain celibate in their process and, as a result they were rejected and shunned – unable to become ordained, and not on the list of individuals available for call

Like in the gospel reading this morning, the “family” tried to restrain these four sons of the tradition and pull them back into the house because their ministries and voices were starting to gain attention

And, like the gospel reading this morning, other members of the LGBTQ community and allies were starting to congregate outside the house and pay attention to what these four were saying

The religious leaders did their part to restrain them, too, creating documents that more formally denied them the right to be pastors in the church in the fullest expression of their identities

But, ultimately, they refused to come in, and these four sons of the tradition found true “family” in that greater LGBTQ community and allies outside

Ironically, all of their families of origin joined the movement outside the house – but, it was the “family” of the church who gave them the cold shoulder

A few years later, two congregations in San Francisco made the bold decision to call one of these gay men to be their pastor alongside a lesbian couple

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America wouldn’t condone these decisions, but the groundswell of gospel-good-news had grown such that these congregations found Bishops willing to ordain these three leaders

And, on January 20, 1990, a mid sized Lutheran Church in San Francisco, St. Paulus, hosted nearly 1,000 people who witnessed the first ordination of three publicly out, partnered or desired to be partnered ministers of the church

Just as we witnessed in the Philadelphia 11 film that documents the irregular ordination of 11 women to the Episcopal Church in 1974; January

20, 1990 was the day three individuals were ordained “extraordinarily” to the Lutheran Church

LGBTQ people are not unaccustomed to having to carve out their own “families” and “family spaces” – put differently, chosen family are often the only family for many in the LGBTQ community

Some might say, that was then, it’s different now.

But, studies indicate that 20% of homeless youth today identify as LGBTQ and name it as one of the core reasons for their homelessness<sup>1</sup>

Gay bars and nightclubs are still more often considered a sanctuary to the LGBTQ community than spaces like this

“Here are my mother and my brothers!” said Jesus. “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Debie Thomas, in reflecting on this morning’s gospel could equally be writing about the story of these Berkeley men when she writes: “In this [story], Jesus proves himself even more provocative, and pays a far higher price than I can even imagine. Can you picture the scene? [In one space] stand the insiders — the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and Jesus doesn’t fit the bill. [In the other space] sit the outsiders — the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They’re not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. And in the midst of them? Smack in the center of the sick, the insane, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox and the unwashed? There sits Jesus, saying, ‘This. This is my family.’”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness\\_among\\_LGBT\\_youth\\_in\\_the\\_United\\_States#cite\\_note-Les\\_B.\\_Whitbeck\\_2004,\\_p.\\_330-11](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homelessness_among_LGBT_youth_in_the_United_States#cite_note-Les_B._Whitbeck_2004,_p._330-11)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/1805-a-house-divided>

“If we’re not shaken,” she goes on, “then we’re not paying attention.”

“I can’t help but imagine what it must have felt like to be inside the house with Jesus that day,” she goes on. “I know intimately and well, as perhaps you do, the hunger to belong, to have someone safe and loving to belong to. Regardless of our circumstances, we all know what it’s like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That’s exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family.”

The story of the Berkeley Four – Jeff, Joel, Greg, and Jim – is, in many ways, the story of so many in the LGBTQ community, in particular the LGBTQ community and the church

And, their story is so aligned with the good news of our radical, marginalized-loving savior

Of the Berkeley Four, Jeff is the only one who ever got ordained. Greg and Jim left the process to be ordained, staying close by the church in this new expression of the “family” but not as clergy.

Joel moved to Los Angeles and, while never ordained, had a ministry of accompaniment and chaplaincy with AIDS patients – the disease that was killing so many in their community, and the disease which would eventually take Joel’s life in 1995

Joel may not have been ordained, but he was a prolific writer and preacher and, I would say, a prophet

In one sermon, he wrote: “It’s time for us to bring God’s good news, and not the church’s bad news, to the LGBTQ community. It’s time to care for the kicked-out, the run away, the imprisoned, the friendless, the dying. It’s time to celebrate what has already been done... We celebrate God’s gracious gifts. We proclaim the love, the life, and the grace of God at work within us

and our community...The most precious grace God gives us is the grace to be ourselves. And now, it is time to let grace abound.”<sup>3</sup>

The times have changed, both my church and the Episcopal Church allow LGBTQ people to serve the church, pretty much in the fullest expression of who we are

Jeff, the only one of the four who got ordained, was received into the ELCA’s roster when they changed their policy in 2009 (19 years after his extraordinary ordination)

And last year, 33 years after his ordination and 14 years after being welcomed back into the church, Jeff was elected Bishop of the very Synod that had previously kicked him and his congregation out

And, things got better for Jesus – Mark tells us that at his crucifixion Mary, Jesus’ mother, was there, and she was with the women who went to anoint his body three days later - she had come out of the house and joined the wider family

And yet, even as times have changed, it may be healthy for us to reflect on this story about Greg, Jim, Joel, and Jeff and this story about Jesus and ask ourselves today and every Sunday: who is it who sits in our “house”?

Is it the insiders? Or, is it the outsiders? “the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes” as Debie names them.

Would it be a challenge to us to strive to be a community of the latter? A community that never sits comfortably in our seats because we are always being challenged to love more broadly, see Jesus reflected more compellingly in those we are least like?

Yes, I imagine it would be.

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<sup>3</sup> From “Dear God, I am gay — thank you!” p. 33. Writings by Joel R. Workin, edited by Michael Price Nelson, second edition. Extraordinary Lutheran Ministries, 2012.

“Yes, Jesus divides the house, and that process hurts,” Debie concludes. “But he doesn’t divide it to make us homeless. He divides it to rebuild it. To make it more spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful... His will be a house of healing for the whole world.”

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

So, dear family, let us sit uncomfortably because the radical love of God is the truth that “the most precious grace God gives us is the grace to be ourselves” – wholly, unreservedly, with pride! – “And now, it is time to let grace abound.”

Amen