

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, June 09, 2024

The Third Sunday After Pentecost

Festal Eucharist

11:00 am

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Prisca Lee-Pae, *Associate for Pan-Asian Ministry*

on

Genesis 3:8-15; Mark 3:20-35

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Calling to be God's family

Family profoundly influences a person from birth through growth into independence and is the most special relationship in the world. However, it is also a relationship where we can easily be hurt or hurt others. As we know, many lifelong traumas come from family members. In today's Gospel, we see uncomfortable situations that arise because they involve family. Jesus' relatives went out to restrain Him, as people were saying that He had gone out of His mind. They believed they had the authority to restrain Jesus because they were His relatives. They may have done this out of concern that Jesus would be caught up in the rumors circulating that He was crazy. However, in the end, it seemed as if they were agreeing with the criticism of the scribes, who said that Jesus had Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he cast out demons. Another passage in today's Gospel challenges our notion of family as a special relationship: Jesus' questioning his family, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" prompts us to think that he doesn't care about his own family.

Indeed, most of Jesus' comments about family in the Bible make us uncomfortable. He said, "*I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one's foes will be members of one's own household.*" He also said, "*Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life.*" We know Jesus called Simon Peter and Andrew from the sea of Galilee, telling them to follow Him and He would make them fishers of people. So, they left their nets and followed Him. Since Simon's mother-in-law is mentioned in Synoptic Gospels, it is clear he had of a family to take care of. Is following Jesus a path that allows one to be irresponsible toward one's family? He says whoever loves parents or children more than Him is not worthy of Him, showing that love for Him and love for family can conflict. This implies family can be a significant obstacle to discipleship.

Today in Genesis, we heard the story of how eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil disrupted several key relationships. It strained the relationship between humans and God, fractured the bond between two people who loved each other, and damaged the connection with another of God's creatures, the serpent. Through this story we saw what happens when we act according to our own will and not God's will, and when we recommend or accept our own will over God's will just because we are family. Moreover, it was before God created Eve that God told Adam not to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Therefore, Adam had an important task to properly convey to Eve that she should follow God's will. Adam called Eve the bone of his bones and the flesh of his flesh, but

when he was in trouble, he blamed Eve and, by extension, God saying “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate.” We know very well that Adam is not alone in making such mistakes.

Family should not be a relationship where one imposes their will just because they are family, but a relationship where members help each other carry out God's will. Through the conversion of one man, Zacchaeus, a short tax collector, his household was saved and called Abraham's descendants. Clearly, family can be an obstacle, but it can also be a stepping stone. Jesus warns us to avoid letting our family become an obstacle because we often see family as an extension of our ego. In the past of strong patriarchal society, a wife and children were considered a man's property. Treating family as an extension of oneself degrades them into property and leads to the sin of demanding one's will rather than God's will. Jesus said not to love family more than Him, not that we should not love our family. He is the one who told us to love even our enemies. We know that Jesus healed Simon's mother-in-law and entrusted His beloved disciple to His mother Mary before His death on the cross.

Jesus did not deny family but challenged our idea of family. We easily hurt our precious family members because we believe we can do as we please. Jesus is telling us this. ‘What do you think family is? Do you think that family belongs to you? No! They are called to the family of God!’ This message calls us to shift from self-centered thinking to God-centered thinking and invites us to expand our limited view of family to include God's family. When Jesus said, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, and mother,” He was expanding His family to include everyone who follows God's will, regardless of race, nationality, education, or wealth.

Are we brothers, sisters of Jesus? One moment comes to mind whenever I face this question. Although it happened 25 years ago, I can remember it vividly. Many places have disappeared due to redevelopment now, but at that time, there were Shanty towns formed densely on high ground in Seoul Korea called “moon village” where the poor lived. Several Anglican priests moved into these areas and established small churches named the ‘House of Sharing’ to live as neighbors to the poor. There, they ran after-school classes for children without parental care, visited lonely elderly people, provided a place for residents to discuss local issues and build solidarity, and so on. Every summer, I stayed at the House of Sharing for a week with young adults from various Anglican churches, meeting residents and helping with the work of the House of Sharing.

One day, we joined the Wednesday evening meeting where the House of Sharing staff discussed their activities and plans, and shared communion. The stories they shared were so precious, revealing what they felt and learned living and working with their poor neighbors. During Holy Communion, I looked around at them and I felt like I heard Jesus say, “These are my brothers, sisters, and mother.” Even 25 years later, I still cannot forget the beautiful moment of Holy Communion, when bread and wine were shared in a small room with only a few little tables and candles on them. The beauty of Holy Communion came not from a magnificent cathedral, a gorgeous altar, or a shining chalice, but from the people who shared it and lived according to God's will.

We are all called to live as brothers, sisters, and mother of Jesus. As we pray, “Father in heaven,” we acknowledge we are sisters and brothers with one Father. We are God's children, living in the hope that God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Being called the brother, sister, and mother of Jesus may not lead to an easy life, but it leads to a true life. The church community, the body of Christ, that we are called to build, is not for ourselves but for our neighbors.

The word translated as repent comes from the Greek word metanoia, which means to go beyond the mind or go into the large mind. Jesus' call to repent is a message to adopt a higher, more inclusive spirit rather than a self-centered way of thinking. The path of love that embraces more people beyond oneself, one's family, and one's community is painful because growth and expansion come with pain. But it is also the path to joy that the world cannot give or know, like the path Jesus took on the cross, which led beyond suffering and death to new life in resurrection. The one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus and will bring us into his presence. My favorite hymn reflects this journey:

We are pilgrims on a journey, and companions on the road. We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

May each of us here live as brothers, sisters, and mother of Jesus, walking together, holding hands, holding the Christ-light for each other, and sharing sorrows and joys until the end of this journey, practicing God's will with all our hearts.
