

“In the Cool of the Evening”

Some of the most important questions in the Bible are about relationships. Our relationships with family, with neighbor, with coworker, with country, with authority or with God. We want to know what is expected of us in important relationships. We learn lots of this relationship information by socialization that takes place in the home, church, school, playground, or anywhere people interact with one another. Some of it is learned by observing how relationships work. Some of it is learned by trial and error as we seek to figure out relationships. Some of it is explicitly taught to us by authority figures. There are also books of etiquette that teach us how to act in situations we have not encountered. This is especially true for situations that have idiosyncratic rules and may require inside knowledge. For example, how to interact with royalty or people from another culture or religion.

There are at least two striking relationships in today’s readings that may give us pause. The first one, and one that many readers overlook occurs in the first sentence of the reading from Genesis. Due to the familiarity with the text or because the scene is so dramatic we are drawn to the sin and condemnation part of the reading. That is not wrong per se, but what of that first sentence? “[Adam and Eve] heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” What does this tell you about the relationship between the first humans and God? Tell me what you think. [Listen for intimate, familiar, regular, personal, informal, friendly, ...] It tells me that their relationship was close, personal, and nonhierarchical. It tells me that the Creator God was accustomed to hanging out in the Garden of Eden with the humans. They took strolls in the garden regularly in the cool of the evening. These strolls remind me of how good friends or spouses share time to recap the day sharing thoughts, concerns, and joys. It is a level of warmth and intimacy that we crave in our relationships.

But this time instead of going to meet God the scripture says that “the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God.” For God it must have been like when we go to a friend’s house and knock on the door, but they do not answer. We see the car in the driveway, the curtains flutter, and even hear low talking inside. We wonder what gives? Why are our friends avoiding us so conspicuously. In the case of Adam and Eve it is shame that causes them to avoid God. It is also like the child who hides its face thinking that he cannot be seen because he cannot see the other.

The problem is that the humans have broken the relationship with God. There was one rule in the Garden of Eden and they broke it. Now they feel they can no longer go for those evening strolls with God anymore. I imagine that God, who was looking forward to the walk, is as disappointed in the loss of the relationship as much as in the disobedience of the people. The question could be as simple as “Didn’t you value our time together enough to not do that one thing? Didn’t you realize all that was jeopardized by eating from that tree? Did I have to spell it out?” What a tragic loss.

When we turn to today’s Gospel reading, we see another type of relationship at play. Jesus’ family, convinced he has lost his mind, comes to take him home. But as I have said many times it is the context of this passage that is critical. Last week we heard about two run ins that Jesus had with the Pharisees. The first encounter was because his disciples were picking random heads of grain as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. The Pharisees saw this as work and chided Jesus for allowing the disciples to break the commandment not to work on the Sabbath. Next, they saw

him cure a man with a withered hand in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. This made the Pharisees angry enough to want to plot how to “destroy him.”

Between that episode and today’s reading, “hearing all that he was doing” “a great multitude from Galilee followed him.” Jesus preaches and teaches them and cures many. Then he goes up a mountain where he calls from his followers twelve whom he gives the authority to preach and the power to cast out demons.

Imagine you are part of Jesus’ family and you have heard he has done these things, what would you think? Remember to us he is Jesus Christ, but to them he is their brother not a deity. What if your brother or sister started healing people, having words with the religious authorities, preaching to great crowds, and commissioning disciples to preach and heal? Would you think that was normal or might you get the family together for an intervention? You might think, “We need to get him home before he does something really crazy.” Thus, his family comes to a house where he is staying to take him home. But when someone tells him his family is there, he says something incredible, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

It may not be obvious because we have heard this passage before, but Jesus just did something radical. He just redefined family. Many people, although not all people, would consider their family as their base. Certainly the biological family was an important aspect of Jewish life then, just as it is now. In this one statement Jesus redefines family from a biological connection to a faith connection, specifically focused on doing the will of God.

When Jesus commissioned the disciples he made them his family. Those who are gathered around him listening to his teaching are his family. The Pharisees and religious authorities that are plotting against Jesus, are not his family because they are not doing the will of God. His biological family may still be his family, but they are part of a greater group. It is no longer blood relationships and ancestry that create family. The family of Jesus is the family of those who are bound together by how they act, what they believe, and to whom they give their allegiance. If anything gets in the way of the relationship with God, even family, it is not of God and is put aside.

In just two sentences Jesus remakes how we look at the world. It is not an accident that we call the people we attend worship with our church family. We are bound together in Christ. We care for each other in Christ. We provide for each other, share with each other, pray for each other, love each other in Christ because that is God’s will. We are family not because of anything human but because of our baptism and how we gather shoulder to shoulder at that altar. When we accept the body and blood of Christ we are made the family of God. The God who from the beginning of time has desired nothing more than walk with us in the cool of the evening in a garden.