

June 7, 2015  
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Mark 3:20-35

### Music to Our Ears

Some years ago, while my husband Tim and I lived in rural Tanzania, I started singing with the local church choir. My reason for singing with that choir was different from the reason people sing with our choir, I joined to improve my Kiswahili. But I joined for another reason as well: to keep me interested in these loooong worship services which I could barely understand. No comment on whether that's why our choir members sing...

Some of the songs we sang in Tanzania were familiar to me; the tunes were hymns I knew. You would know them too, but you would hear them sung there with that distinctive African four part harmony, and you would see the singers moving, adding to these old German or Swedish melodies a rhythmic sway that somehow worked. Other songs we sang were completely new to me, as was the way we learned them. No sets of musical scores. The choir director would blow a pitch pipe, and sing the part for each vocal section, soprano, alto, tenor, bass. I would stand next to my section sisters and try to sing what they were singing.

I remember one song in particular, I heard it a number of times before I joined the choir myself. It was catchy, had lots of energy and an upbeat feel and the choir was especially good at it. It was with some surprise that I finally learned the words. That happy chorus that they sang with such enthusiasm translated roughly to: "Jesus, your mother and brothers are looking for you!" "Who are my mother and brothers?" Jesus replied, "Here are my mother and brothers!"

It may seem an odd choice to set to a catchy tune: Jesus rejects his immediate family, this story of today's reading from the gospel according to Mark, just three chapters in. We're back in Mark now, we're we'll be for much of the summer, picking up where we left off back the last time the church paraments were green, back in February, after Jesus' baptism, just at the start of his public ministry. He began it with an exorcism, and then many healings. That's what Jesus was born to do: drive out the forces of evil, illness, return people to wholeness and health. All this creates a stir, people start to follow him, Jesus and his disciples don't even have time to eat, as the reading begins so abruptly. Crowds gather, religious officials come to check him out.

Jesus' family takes note of all this, too. They hear what people are saying: he's out of his mind, he's crazy, he himself is a demon. The gospel says then that Jesus family goes "to restrain him." Perhaps they are worried about him, or perhaps they're embarrassed by him. Perhaps they are trying to protect him, or perhaps they are trying to silence him. But Jesus will not be restrained, Jesus will not be silent. He's not possessed. Jesus asks, "How could Satan, cast out the Satan?" He tells parables to show he's come to conquer all forces of evil, to tie it up, to grant forgiveness to all for everything. It's important to note here how incredibly broad Jesus' announcement of forgiveness is, because so many have misinterpreted Jesus' saying about the unforgiveable sin. Jesus says the unforgiveable sin is to call him demonic.

But even after Jesus explains himself, his family still must be concerned, for they come and stand outside the place where Jesus is, and they send for him. And Jesus doesn't even go out to see them. He says, in effect, I'm not related to them.

Biblical scholars tell us the very oddness, even offensiveness of the story is a powerful argument for its staying power and significance. Something so embarrassing would only be included if it really happened, really meant something. I hear two things:

First, the Son of God knew what it was like to experience strained family relationships. I take tremendous comfort in this. When one of my siblings is writing hurt e-mails about what

another sibling did, or when I'm feeling distanced from my parents, or distraught about my own parenting, when I am in the midst of family strain, it helps me to remember that complicated family relationships are part of, are all over, the Biblical record. Think your family is at odds? You are in good company, from the beginning of Genesis, with Adam and Eve pointing fingers, through the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs and all their dysfunctional relationships and offspring, right up through the story of Jesus. Jesus was not born into, nor ever himself established, a family like the one you see in the stock photos in the frames at Walgreens. In the Bible, there is no picture perfect family.

Second, in Christ, we can be part of another kind of family. It's not a family made by genetic codes, or a shared last names, or a roof you share, or how you were raised. This family is made by the raising of Jesus, and by God's intention to raise us all up as well. In the Bible, God's plan for new life, for new creation, consistently upsets "traditional" family expectations. Younger sons receive blessings, despised outsiders marry in, virgins conceive. Jesus upsets family expectations.

It seems in today's gospel Jesus does not just upset, but rejects his family. If they were trying to keep him from doing what he was born to do, from being who he was born to be, then yes, that does need to be rejected. Some things about your family need to be rejected. What Jesus says, though, is also an invitation. It's an invitation to anyone who hears it, including his family. Cue now that catchy chorus of that song from Tanzania. "Who are my mother and brothers?" Jesus replied, "Here are my mother and brothers and sisters." Every single one of us can be part of Jesus' family. We were given that birth certificate in the waters of baptism. We can join that chorus by doing God's will, we can say, "I add my voice to those who call themselves brothers and sisters of Christ."

So sing, it can help keep you interested, invested, involved. It's why we invite children to sing, so know that they are a part of this community, this family. Sing, because it can help you learn another language, the language of faith, and hope in things unseen. Sing, because sometimes it's all you can do. When you cannot say how you feel, or what you believe, you can sing. At hospital bedsides, at gravesides, out of the depths we cry out, we sing, that is what God's family does. And when you cannot even sing, come stand next to your sisters and brothers in Christ, be surrounded by those who will sing next to you, who will sing for you, God's love song for all.