

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Eighth Sunday After Pentecost – July 8, 2018 – SUMMER of HEALING**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**  
**Mark 6:1-13**

**FOR REFLECTION**

**“A family can be the bane of one's existence. A family can also be most of the meaning of one's existence. I don't know whether my family is bane or meaning, but they have surely gone away and left a large hole in my heart.”**

~ The Bone People, Keri Hulme (b.1947) New Zealand author

**“My sister only has one side of the story but she is sure that she knows the whole story because that is how the dysfunctional system works. We don't question everyone or even consider that there may be another side to the story but instead automatically believe the one who has the most power in the relationship.”**

~ Darlene Ouimet, <http://www.emergingfrombroken.com>

**Healing Our Families**

The Gospel of Mark does not start with a lovely and miraculous birth narrative with shepherds and angels. Nor does he wax poetic about the Light of God coming into the world. Mark drops us into Galilee during the prophetic ministry of John, Jesus' cousin – and brings in Jesus on the day of his baptism (at the age of 30) by that same cousin. Virgins, babies and 12-year-olds are not of interest to Mark. Although he seems to have some back story on Jesus' home life – and it's not pretty.

The Scholars Version (The Five Gospels) of Mark translates the text closer to the common vernacular of his writing – making his comments about Jesus' family straight forward and the meaning hard to miss. He mentions Jesus' family twice in Chapter 3:

Mark 3:20-21 (The Five Gospels)

Then he goes home, and once again a crowd gathers, so they could not even grab a bite to eat. When his relatives heard about it, they came to get him. (You see, they thought he was out of his mind.)

Mark 3:31-35 (The Five Gospels)

Then his mother and his brothers arrive. While still outside, they send in and ask for him. A crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, “Look, your mother and your brothers [and sisters] are outside looking for you. In response he says to them, “My mother and brothers – who ever are they? And looking right at those seated around him in a circle, he says, “Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will, that's my brother and sister and mother!”

And then comes Chapter 6:

Mark 6:3-4 (The Five Gospels)

This is the carpenter, isn't it? Isn't he Mary's son? And who are his brothers, if not James and Judas and Simon? [*Brother Joses seems to be missing from this version.*] And who are his sisters, if not our neighbors? And they were resentful of him. Jesus used to tell them: "No prophet goes without respect, except on his home turf and among his relatives and at home!"

The earliest versions of this story seem to include a saying that was already in circulation back then as common wisdom. Thomas 31:1 says simply:

No prophet is welcome on his home turf.

Other gospels preserve this simple saying. But Mark adds:

...and among his relatives and at home...

So. God became human and lived among us so that God could relate to our issues and we could feel like God is part of our family. And, according to Mark, God-embodied became embedded in a dysfunctional family – just like all of our families. How cool is that?

We can speculate on the nature of that dysfunction. I certainly relate to being the oldest child with a bunch of brothers and sisters – with responsibilities and expectations that go with being the oldest child. That often means being given responsibilities with no power to enact them. I know that I was frustrated...

He was expected to go into the family business and support the family alongside his father. So, walking away at age 30 would have rankled his relatives.

It is POSSIBLE that with unknown parentage he was treated a little differently than his half-brothers and sisters – by his adoptive father or both parents. All kinds of psychological impacts from that.

He seemed to have a very intense relationship with the Divine – a point made by Mark in the baptism account. Perhaps he talked to God in ways that people thought he was talking to himself. Perhaps he waxed eloquent on matters theological and beyond the interest of his immediate family – annoying or astonishing them – causing them to believe he'd gone mental.

We DO know that he was deeply concerned about the plight of the poor and marginalized – to an extent that people who wanted to just focus on their own well-being would have wanted to throttle him. Prophetic, social justice speech and behavior can be very hard to live with – believe me – I know. There would have been push-back. And this text describes it well.

It is interesting that our text says:

5 And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them.

How many of us have left home and redesigned ourselves – discovered new, more interesting or more gifted selves within – created communities and chosen families where we feel more accepted – like “finding our people” – and then gone home for Christmas and felt disempowered – returning to our immature, ignorant selves in a matter of minutes?

Healing ourselves tends to be difficult enough – without attempting to heal our entire families. And the gospels don't give us much guidance on this. But verse 5 does say that, in spite of the dismissal by his hometown neighbors, Jesus WAS able to cure A FEW sick people. Some change IS possible.

Joining Alanon – the 12-step program for codependent people in relationship with an addict – caused my own family some amount of disruption. I stopped participating in some of the most flagrant codependent behaviors, got healthier, set boundaries. This did not endear me to the family members who depended on my codependence the most. My empowerment felt like I had disempowered them. I was the object of anger and exile. I'm not Jesus but I can relate.

In Jesus' time they didn't have 12-step programs, psychotherapy, or theories about family systems. Now we have all that and more – and apply it to all kinds of families – including church “families.” One reason I tend to refer to this group as a “beloved community” is to avoid the term “family” – as families are hard to join. You have to be born into it, marry into it or get adopted into it. Communities are more voluntary and fluid.

HOWEVER, as a community, churches tend to behave much like family systems – mostly dysfunctional ones. So, Family Systems Theory was taught with vigor at the training sessions for Interim Ministry. We learned about how churches tend to scapegoat one person or nuclear family, causing the community to avoid talking about the real issues. We also learned how a problematic person can be toxic and spread dysfunction like a virus – and how creating and maintaining a healthy boundary around that person can keep the virus from spreading. We learned about “Behavioral Covenants” at our church retreat – and then applied one when we got home. There is more to learn about this – but we are on the right track.

We learned as Interim Ministers to go into churches as a “Non-Anxious Presence” – reminding ourselves that the dysfunctions are not about us – to step-down the anxiety rather than ratchet it up. *[I have to say this is the trickiest part for those of us with anxiety disorders...Possible, but tricky.]*

This takes a lot of work – and I’m actually fairly good at it for about two years. After that I become part of the system and tend to get embroiled in the anxiety. I’m learning the hard way – as an installed member of the community – to ask healthy people with good boundaries for help in getting disentangled.

I’ve mentioned before that my grandmother used to say, “If its important, we don’t talk about it.” It was no joke. My great-uncle’s suicide note was burned and its contents never revealed. When my adopted brother was taken away by social services – we didn’t talk about it. There are rules of relating that date way back in our society that preclude talking about anything distasteful. And that rule continues to plague church communities where we would rather leave than confront – we persist in being “nice” rather than honest.

So, we don’t learn healthy ways of solving problems. We have a society now that can be cruel over social media – anonymously – but can’t seem to be honest with civility in person. Healing society has to be done at all levels – from family to church to work environments – to congress. The #metoo Movement is part of the healing process. All of the Civil Rights Movements and legal redresses are part of this process. And that is why having our Supreme Court slide backward into the mire of un-enlightenment is so horrifying.

Our social dysfunction is rooted in how our families function; that functioning needs to be healed. To see the dysfunction in full relief – just attend a family funeral and observe the interactions and the drama. We drop back into our reptilian brains and react as if we’ve never grown up [something I do with humiliating alacrity]. It is astounding.

I did a history workshop with a UCC church in Southern California – and discovered that, half a century earlier, two families had engaged in a serious disagreement which led to shoving one another in the sanctuary – and then going home to arm themselves. That level five conflict poisoned the church family for 50 years until it was discussed in the workshop and put to rest.

There are a lot of resources available to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – and most of them do not involve “laying hands” on one another. Family and Individual therapy (with new approaches being developed as we speak), medications for actual brain chemistry imbalances, compassionate and non-violent communication skills for families and churches (which must be practiced as much as possible or they are lost to reptilian reactions). There are ways to practice honest, civil discourse – to engage one another in disagreements over values as well as politics. Success is dependent on the absence of weaponry – hence a needed focus on gun control and disarmament in every quarter.

There is a cartoon that has circulated for decades – the title says something like, “Annual Gathering of Members of Healthy Families.” It pictures two people seated far apart in a large auditorium. All of our families can use some work and some healing – in every generation. In a way, the families that are working on their dysfunction are the healthy ones.

Jesus had work to do at home as well as in society – healing spirits, bodies and relationships – including his own.

He was the epitome of an Interim Rabbi – mirroring back the dysfunctions of religious and legal statutes – violating them if necessary – setting up alternative communities that functioned in a healthier way.

Perhaps there is something to learn from him. What do you think?

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**Scripture Reading for Sunday July 8, 2018 – Eighth after Pentecost – Year B**

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**Mark 6:1-13 (NRSV)**

1 He left that place and came to his **hometown**, and his disciples followed him. 2 On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! **3 Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. 4 Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house."** 5 **And he could do no deed of power there**, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. 6 And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching.

7 He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. 8 He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; 9 but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. 10 He said to them, "Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. 11 If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them." 12 So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. 13 They cast out many demons and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.