

Did you feel a little twinge when you heard the Gospel reading this morning? I do, every time I hear it. It's the exchange that takes place at the end of the passage that is so shocking. Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside, asking for you." And Jesus asked, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Then he looked around at the ones who had been sitting with him and listening to him, and he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

It's shocking to hear, and it's a radical message, and it makes me wonder. It makes me wonder what it really means to be family. We read and hear so much about families — family values, family enrichment, family camps, family therapy. And so much of what is being written and said and done is an attempt to help families who are experiencing a state of deep and painful crisis. Divorce continues to be epidemic. City streets and parks and beaches and overpasses have become hangouts and homes for thousands of teenagers who have run away or been kicked out of the house. And what do you think we would see and hear if we looked and listened into homes in our own communities and all across America? I suspect that in lots and lots of homes we would see and hear open and explosive hostility, or, at best, the most fragile kind of cease fire. Lots of families in this nation are in crisis — to the point of emotional or even physical death. Relationships are strained or fractured and they're coming unglued. There is tremendous pain and anger and mistrust and abuse. And if we're not experiencing any of those things ourselves, if we're at all self-aware, we won't be too smug, because we know we're never more than a hair's breadth away.

In the midst of these circumstances, so many people come to church looking for something, anything, whatever it will take to hold them together. And what we get today is this hard message about what it means to be family. It will be a shocking, frightening message, unless we remember that at its heart this is a

message about conversion and discipleship. If we are going to be converted and become disciples, followers of Jesus, if we are going to become true members of this supernatural family of Christ's own, then we will need to claim that identity as our first and most important identity. If we're going to commit our lives to Jesus and to living according to Gospel values, then we will need to understand and accept that sometimes it's going to pinch. Family and friends may not share our commitment. The conversion we seek and claim may be met with bewilderment or suspicion or seething resentment.

Do you remember what happened in today's reading? Jesus' family had come out to restrain him, to talk some sense into him. They thought he was getting carried away. "Carried away," that's a phrase my no-nonsense Midwestern mom used to use a lot. We'd be rough-housing and horsing around, and my mom would say, "Now don't get carried away!" Jesus' family thought he was getting carried away. We may get the same reaction. People might say, "You know this church thing was all right at first, but things have gotten way out of hand. You're taking this stuff much too seriously."

If we want to be true members of the family of God that's the choice we make and the chance we take. And if we're worried about the risk, Jesus might say this: "Don't worry, if you lose a friend or a business deal because you're trying to live according to your baptismal promises. That wasn't really a friend, and it wasn't a deal worth making.

And if you think you've lost a mother or a father or a sister or a brother, remember this: One of the most important by-products of genuine love is trust — trust in the one who is loved. The opposite of trust is the desire to control, and the desire to control is never a sign of true love." And we might remember this, too: Conversion is not a part-time proposition, and it's not something that gets accomplished once and for all time. It's a process that calls us deeper into discipleship moment by moment and day by day for all of our life. Sometimes

the joy will be indescribable and the peace will be beyond our understanding, and sometimes the demands will seem impossible and the pinching will seem unbearable. Families of all shapes and kinds are in trouble. There are lots of reasons for that, but for Christians maybe part of the problem is that we have been only part-time converts — we haven't truly grasped what kinship with Christ means.

Today Jesus reminds us what membership in the family of faith is about, and there's a warning that there's risk involved. All of our relationships might change, and some may even be lost. But for anything we might lose or give up, there is something infinitely more important to be gained. It has to do with the quality of life, and with the depth of love and trust. It has to do with remembering that if we suffer discomfort or even rejection, we suffer with and for the One who suffered first, and most, for us. He is the One who calls us deeper into discipleship. He is the One who promises to go with us for every moment and every step of our journey toward faith. This morning's Gospel wants to help us understand what it means to be united with one another and with Christ.

It wants to remind us that to do the will of God is the way of being numbered as a member of this family — not claiming the same last name, not simply sharing the same DNA, not performing some perfunctory religious duty, but a commitment to living all of life as disciples — this is doing God's will. And we know what God wants from us.

What does God want?

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Matt. 22:37, Luke 10:27

Or another way: "Do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with your God." Micah 6:8

It's a difficult challenge. It's a challenge that can pinch. But it's a challenge that is uniquely

ours. We heard it first at Baptism, and we've heard it again today with this talk about family and about who's in and who's not. If we accept the challenge the Holy Spirit of God will sustain us, and the Holy Spirit of God will remind us of all that makes us one.

And then we will be able to become family in the most powerful, wonderful sense of that word. Then we will be united with one another and with our God by bonds that can never be broken.

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