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## A Lesson from a Bad Family Reunion

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I imagine, after Jesus went to his hometown and no one got what he was doing, he could have said, “Whose idea was it to have a family reunion?” I imagine that after he was rejected, he took out a notebook and wrote on the top of the sheet: Tally of those who hate me:

- Satan and the demons
- Herod, the ruler of Israel
- The religious authorities of the temple and synagogue
- The Roman authorities
- Pig farmers
- The people of my hometown

From almost the beginning of the Gospel of Mark conflict between Jesus and all sorts of powers immediately escalated—conflict with spiritual powers to the powers of religion and state to the power of people who had money at stake. But, today, it wasn’t abstract. Today, the conflict was with people who knew him since he was a child. They knew his parents, his brothers and his sisters. (And yes, according to Mark, Jesus had many siblings.) The townspeople included his relatives, his extended family. Jesus expected a warm reception based on growing up together. Or, at least he thought they would be open to his newfound powers, powers he received by the Holy Spirit in his baptism. But, his hometown didn’t know anything about his baptism and what happened when the Spirit plunged into him, empowering him to confront Satan and all the forces that held humanity in bondage to sickness and sin. He had changed, but they had remained the same.

The same that they remained was the butt of derisive jokes. “Hey, what’s the armpit of Galilee? Nazareth!” No, nothing good came out of Nazareth. No business came there. No one wanted to build there. Just dusty roads with hovels for homes. So, when he came home and began to teach in the local synagogue, his relatives and townspeople were

mystified. “Hold on. This is Joshua, right? Now he’s going by the Greek form Jesus? Well isn’t that hoity-toity. He’s the tinker! Of Mary and “father unknown”? We know his brothers James, Joses, and Simon. And his sisters.” They were offended by him. Where did he get this newfound wisdom and power? Wherever it was, he could shove it. “Hey Joshua. Oh, we mean, ‘Jesus’!” You’re getting too big for your britches. We know who you are. You’re not a big deal.”

Gosh, even the demon he casted out in the synagogue in Capernaum cried out, “We know who you are, the Holy One of God.” But his own kin were saying, “You’re not all that.” What was the problem with Nazareth? Did they need to make him small because they felt so small? Was it such a habit to be despised that they despised anyone who wanted to lift their head a bit higher. It was preposterous to them that God would choose their town to be the earthly origins of the messiah.

This last rejection was unlike the others because it was so personal. He was actually amazed at them. Because they would not receive what he had to give, he could not give to them the fullness of the gospel, not really. He could only heal a few sick people. It was nothing like the lines of people in the other villages. I imagine that some of us could identify with Jesus here, having his own kin take the most parsimonious view of him. For Jesus, home was even less safe, less joyful, than being among the demons.

After Jesus added his hometown to the list of people who hated him, he must have thought to himself, “What does it all mean? What do I do next?” The experience at Nazareth was not exactly motivating. He would get no love there. So, how to go on preaching the gospel? He had to think about how to persevere in the face of such a personal blow as the rejection by his own relatives, his family, and the people he grew up with.

So he gathered his disciples to teach them about how to deal with rejection and how to persevere. He said, “The gospel will need to be preached beyond me and my time. I give you the same powers I have to declare the good news by casting out demons and healing the sick. But, more importantly, I will teach you how to rely only on God. Take nothing with you when you go out—no money, no extra tunic, no staff. Internally, don’t bring with you extra mental baggage, like your need to be liked. Don’t try to please

people. You can't reach everyone. It's not your fault. Be true instead to God and to the truth. Shake the dust from your sandals if they won't welcome you."

The reality is that we are all born with a survival instinct to attach, especially to our parents and family. Healthy attachment makes for the ability to make friendships and marriages be a source of support and joy, rather than debasement. However, not all families facilitate healthy attachment. Instead, the family system might consume the individual for the sake of a family narrative, an image to display to the public or to the ego. Painfully, we can carry this into other circles and play out that attachment style there—seeking approval and affection from the very people who are the most parsimonious with it. Jesus saw how deadly this was and gave his disciples permission to let it go—to let go of their need to be liked by those who reject them. Instead, they were to trust in God for who they were and what they were about. In this way, their proclamation of the Gospel was purified of their own hidden intentions.

I have found that there is a pervasive disease in Christian circles, which is this specious teaching that to be a faithful person is to have people like us, make people happy, and that if we don't, we aren't good people. If that were the case, then Jesus was really bad at being a Christian. Jesus taught his disciples to shake the dust off their sandals as a process of discernment. The question to ask as one shakes the dust is this: Who am I? Whom do I listen to to tell me who I am?" The answer that frees us is this: God is for me and with me and the source of my identity through the vagaries of human relationships. This doesn't make me right; and it doesn't make me wrong. But, when we hear, "Repent for the Kingdom is here," repentance here would be to choose God's love of us—God's love of us, as our first measuring stick.