

“Jesus’ Chosen Family”

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Psalm 97:10-12 | Mark 3:31-35

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Well, we’re having quite the service today! The jazz band trio, a youth perspective on God’s call to justice, the new members’ rite and ceremony coming up soon, the start of Pride month and the opening of a new pride-themed art exhibit in Ripley Presents, *and* Communion Sunday. And, at the center of everything we have going on inside and outside of worship today: Scripture and the story of Jesus’s chosen family.

In the third chapter of the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is speaking to his community of friends, strangers, and followers. Jesus’ mother, brothers, and sisters of origin—meaning, the family he was born into—approach the circle surrounding Jesus. His family of origin calls for him. Some of Jesus’ community alert him to the fact that his family of origin is waiting for him. Jesus could have used this moment as a time to delineate and distinguish the people in his life, as well as the roles they played and what they meant to him. You’re either family *or* friend, stranger, or follower, but never the twain shall meet. Instead, Jesus bridges that gap and widens the table of who he invites to be his family—who he considers to be his family. He says to the people gathered around him, “Look, here are my mother and my siblings. Whoever does God’s will is my sibling and mother.” Jesus is saying to the crowd, then, “You may not be in my family tree or of my family of origin, but that makes you no less important to me.” Jesus overthrows this familial hierarchy that was so essential to the governing and structuring of domestic, economic, and social life in the ancient Roman empire. You could say that familial hierarchy has its own place of power in our society, two-thousand years later.

Once again, Jesus is being very subversive here to claim that family is what you *make* it, not only what you’re *given*. Imagine, for example, if I started calling my close friends my family. That might not be so radical, perhaps, but what if I started calling this congregation, this church, my family? If Will were my brother and Jane and Maggie were my sisters? Let’s take it a step

further. What if I called the barista who hands me my coffee my brother, my primary care doctor my sister? What if I called a stranger on the street in crisis or a person with drastically different beliefs than mine my sibling? And, what if I looked them in the eye, took them seriously with love and compassion, and *really meant it*. This is what Jesus models for us in this passage from Scripture. In fact, this same story of Jesus' family of origin approaching the crowd appears, almost verbatim, in Mark as well as the other two synoptic gospels, Matthew and Luke. So, you know it's an important lesson.

Jesus teaches us how to break norms around who we consider family, this much is clear. This is perhaps why you may have heard the term "sibling in Christ" in worship or in reference to a fellow follower of Christ. Not only are we children of our Creator God, but we are also interconnected by the Spirit and written into the chosen family of Christ. As Jesus shows us, the concept of chosen family has always existed. It is a sacred and subversive act, this notion of family as something you choose and cultivate—not only as an entity into which you are born and have very little control or agency.

This Sunday, we worship together on the first day of Pride month and celebrate the *imago dei*, the image of God, in all of our LGBTQ+ siblings lovingly made by Creator God. And, this talk of Jesus' chosen family is empowering and reflective of the lived experience of so many queer and trans folks. Anthropologist Kath Weston coined the phrase "chosen family" in her 1991 book *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship*. Placing chosen family within the context of the queer/trans-lived experience, Weston argues that chosen families are "deliberately chosen networks of support in LGBT communities, consisting of friends, partners and ex-partners, biological and nonbiological children, and others who provide kinship support. Chosen families may live together in a single household, or they may be spread through a larger community" (The SAGE Encyclopedia of Marriage, Family, and Couples Counseling). This quote comes from a summary of her work by Trevor G. Gates. Chosen families become a necessary and life-giving source of connection, companionship, and survival—especially for LGBTQ+ teens

and young adults, as well as those of all ages who may not have a safe or supportive relationship with their family of origin. However, this is not to say that one must be estranged from family of origin to have a chosen family—this is far from the case.

So, we've approached the theme of chosen family from two perspectives so far: one from Jesus (from Scripture) and one from the social sciences. Well, what if we heard from someone who has first-hand experience of cultivating and choosing family? To shed some light on this perspective, I consulted my wife, Flo.

"What is chosen family?" I asked.

"It's family you choose," she replied.

Her response wasn't quite what I was looking for, so I asked if she could add just a smidge more context or explanation. Here's what she said: "Chosen family is the family you choose. They can be biologically-related or family-of-origin or not at all. It's not just made up of people—it can also be non-human animals and beings in the interconnected web of life. Chosen family is who you turn to for support, honesty, love, care, laughter, joy, and adventure in life's journey."

Chosen family has been an important theme and home for me and Flo as we have built our life together. Chosen family is built intentionally. It may come with grief and difficult conversations. It mostly comes with open hearts and a clarity that drives us to where we feel our values are most embodied and where we feel safest. Chosen family is where we can be our authentic selves—where we don't have to hide parts of ourselves or pretend to be someone we're not, and where we're called into accountable love and mutual respect. To paraphrase something that my father-in-law (Flo's dad), Pierre, said to us recently: chosen families are like watersheds, "communities of water strands that come together, and that by doing so are able to exert greater action than they would individually. As the different strands or streams of water come together, their ability to carry and give life to other lifeforms increases....carrying great power for good."

Chosen family is not just the coming together of people from all different walks of life—whether stranger or sibling, friend or follower. Chosen family is not even just a collective where everyone belongs, even when they might have been excluded or othered elsewhere. Chosen family is the abundance of “great power for good,” the ability to carry and give life to other lifeforms in an exponential way. As the saying goes, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.”

Jesus reminds us of this great power chosen families carry. Not only does he model this great power throughout the Gospels, but he also calls us into this great power by demonstrating and embodying how one might approach cultivating a chosen family of their own. He models the openness and inclusiveness with which chosen families should be created. As children of God, we are inherently part of and loved within God’s chosen family. Jesus shows us the way to be active participants within this family: to do “the will of God.”

Today, our church is manifesting the work of God’s chosen family by welcoming our new members with whole hearts and open spirits, responding to Katherine’s call to collective faith and action, reading the testimonies of and seeing the photos of LGBTQ+ clergy and people of faith in Ripley Chapel, eating at the same Communion table in remembrance of Christ, and enjoying fellowship with neighbor and sibling. Before the service ends today, consider how you can continue manifesting the work of God’s chosen family. Who do you want to intentionally make more space for and invite into your chosen family moving forward? How can you and your chosen family live out God’s will and embody or enact your collective great power for good? Is this learning more about and advocating for LGBTQ+ rights? Is this sending a text or giving a call to a queer or trans loved one this month? Is this reading a book based on an LGBTQ+ lived experience, donating to a non-profit that fights for trans recognition and protection, or investing in the local economy and supporting a queer-owned business? Friends, let’s continue the spirit of Christ’s collective good and commit ourselves to being active members of God’s chosen family. Amen.