

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

*The Family of God*

Mark 3:20-35

June 9, 2024

Dear friends, today is my last Sunday with you for a while. I depart on Friday with 16 DaySpringers for a pilgrimage through Italy. This will be the fourth such journey Jenny and I have taken with DaySpring folks and a few others. It's somewhere close to 50 who have traveled on this adventure over the years. It's really wonderful; I'm excited to go with you who are going, have fond memories of our time with those of you who have been, and look forward to hopeful future travels with others of you. This is a special place and a special journey to the resting places of the apostles, the home of some of the world's greatest art, and the home of St. Francis and St. Clare.

After the pilgrimage, I begin a 2-month sabbatical. So, like I said, this is my last Sunday with you for a while. I'll be in Italy and then back in Texas. Later, our family goes to England and Scotland—Oxford, Iona, and the highlands. Please pray for me this summer. I will be praying for you. Pray for me for this time to be God's time in my life, that my pace would slow, my heart would be open, and my spirit ready to receive all the gifts God has to give. I'm grateful for this time and this season. These are my prayers for my own spirit as I enter into it.

On this last Sunday for a while, I have been reflecting on this spring and what this season has meant and what it means for us for the future. We each have our personal journeys of this spring: I taught a seminary course, led a retreat in Oklahoma, planted a garden and watched it wash away in the rains, traveled to Atlanta for a CBF denominational missions committee meeting, and to Charlotte to be part of an ordination, submitted a book manuscript, and mourned the death of my mother. There's been a lot of life in a few months. You have your stories as well. Some are hard; some are beautiful. We have our own life stories, and we have the life we are making here together.

This spring we initiated a pledge campaign with tremendous leadership from within the congregation. Along the way, some of us studied together on biblical generosity, many of us experienced the talent of DaySpring on Showcase night, and many more of us the Celebration Brunch. These were great fun; they uplifted the spirit. No one lost sight that all of it was a part of a call to make some significant sacrifices—financial and otherwise--toward a shared goal of the building project we're beginning to reconfigure and expand our children's building and the whole space over there. I asked Ruben, our wizened consultant, early on if he thought it was going to be ok for me to take a scheduled sabbatical this summer. Ruben said, "Oh, yes. You're gonna need it." He was right, but even he couldn't foresee all that life would bring this spring. And he didn't see how much fun we were going to have along the way and how well the campaign would go. We were asking one another to

join together to make significant sacrifices. And we have begun that journey. There are lessons and blessings to be experienced simply from practicing generosity.

It's good for us. What's it all for? This campaign, these pledges, this generosity? It's for us, for our children, for our youth, for people who we don't know yet, and some of them are sitting here near you... some folks you may not know yet. What you do, you do for them, and they do for you. You may never know what someone sitting near you is doing for you. And they may never know what you are doing for them. These are gifts, given with and for one another and those who are not yet here but are coming.

It's a beautiful expression of what we might call church as family. In today's gospel reading, Jesus calls the men and women of his community his mothers and brothers and sisters, the family of God. Family is a high designation for any community of people, even though family is also sometimes fraught with trouble. Jesus experiences that trouble, already here in Mark 3. Jesus' own family didn't know what to make of him. They come to him while he's teaching a big crowd and urge him to come home. People are starting to wonder if he's out of his mind. Maybe his family is beginning to wonder the same thing. He's claiming big things about himself as the Son of God and the Messiah. He better be right, or there's going to be trouble. As we well know, there was going to be trouble either way. It's still early in the gospel, yet already the religious leaders are coming for him, and unlike his family, they aren't coming in loving concern. They say he has a demonic spirit. That tells you something about their spirit toward him. They aren't just concerned about him or what he's teaching or how he's leading; already by chapter 3, they think he's a demon. Their opposition to Jesus will build until they conspire to have him crucified.

At the end of our story today, Jesus asks, "Who is my family?" He looks around the crowd. "Here is my family. Whoever does the will of God is my family." Likewise, the church is like family.

Given the bumpy road Jesus had with his family, perhaps it's no wonder that by the end of John's gospel, he doesn't call his disciples his family any longer, but friends. Friendship, perhaps is less fraught than family, is also not easy all the time either. Anybody who has ever had a friend for a period of time is perhaps their own story. We can also say church as friendship; church as family. One way or the other, church and discipleship means something important about being in relationship of mutual sacrifice, care, and love with one another. This is what's been going on in the gospel. This is what's been going on this spring and will continue as we go forward.

This is not always so easy. People say, "It's not hard to find a friendly church. It can be hard to find friends at church." Friendliness is nice; friendships are gold. An article in Christianity Today was published online this week titled, "How to Make Friends at Church". I don't have access to their click-through rate, but I'm going to guess that it will be one of their most read stories all year. How to make friends at church. Wouldn't you click that? The author self-describes herself and her husband as "socially awkward academics... who

have zero skills in small talk.” She says, “I’m pretty familiar with the lives and writings of people who’ve been dead for two millennia or longer but often find living people rather harder to understand.” She continues, “And yet being in community with them is a requirement of our faith. God created us for community with himself and other believers, and church community is both a scene and source of spiritual growth. It’s also—eventually—lots of fun, even for the awkward like us.”

The relational path from awkward to fun, from isolation to family, from lonely to friendship, can be short for some people. I’m thinking of Joice Franklin for example, who gathered young women into her home for studies and swapped stories shortly after she arrived at DS. Joice was one for whom the journey to fun was short and expansive. I’m thinking of the hospitality of Katy Stokes, with whom many sat for tea at her table and had in her a listening ear to hear your stories and the depth of your soul. I’m thinking of the infectious laugh of JD McDonald... these are people who make it look easy.

For others, that journey can be long and bumpy. I’m thinking of... just kidding. Did you really think I was going to name someone? Did you think it was you?

I am thinking of the conversations I’ve had with folks over the years who asked, “How do I get to know anyone around here?”, “How do I do this life together with others who take the time to do it with me?”, and the question lurking behind the questions, “Will anyone like me if they know me?” No one’s biggest question in church life ever is: “Can we build a building?” Almost everyone’s question in church life is at some point, “Do I belong?” When Jesus waved his hand over the crowd and said this is my family, how many people in the room felt a surge of love and how many of them looked around and wondered who he was talking to because it can’t be me.

The article author’s conclusion for how to make friends at church is this: “In almost every case, everyone wants to make this happen—it’s just that it takes effort and commitment on all sides. Just as the old guard must remember how difficult it is to come into a new community, so newcomers must remember that initiation is their responsibility, too. As we so easily tell children, be the friend that you want someone else to be to you. That’s really the only solution I have to offer, because it’s the only solution there is: you make friends at church by being a friend at church.”

I think that’s part of it. For all the good reasons for us to embark on this building project and its pledge campaign, I’ve kept coming back to this dynamic in my mind and my heart. This project is an ode to family and friendship etched in brick and mortar—friendship with Christ and with others in Christ. I mean three things by this.

First, the project doesn’t just magically happen. We may not each etch our names on Austin stone over there, but your dollars—freely given, often sacrificially given-- are a prayer of trust and an act of friendship. There’s no one waiting with a big check to pay for it all. Not to my knowledge. (If there is, we’d like to talk to you.) This is ours. All of this has

always been ours. You may not swing a hammer, but you're swinging the hammer. You may not lay the foundation, but you're laying the foundation. You may not wield a paint roller, but you're painting the walls. You're doing this. It's a generational gift to those around you and to those yet to come. Isn't that family? Isn't that friendship? A gift of self to others that binds you to them and them to you. It's a beautiful thing.

Second, the project—the signature back porch—will bear the name Pat and Kurt Kaiser Terrace. This honor is an act of friendship from all of us toward Pat and Kurt, and bears witness to their friendship with DaySpring across generations and eras. You've shared life with them or shared life with someone who's shared life with them. And it expands, then, like ripples in a pond. This project bearing witness to that relationship is a story of connection from the first days of this congregation and dreams for this place and its present and future life together and this ministry. This, too, is family and friendship—giving and receiving shared life across generations.

Third, there will be food and shade and rocking chairs and space. We need all of that. The center aisle of a sanctuary doesn't have much room to facilitate relationships. The narthex by liturgical architectural definition is a liminal space, a pass-through. As Christina Gibson taught us, narthex is Latin for "the place you sign up for things." Parking lots are for cars and nervous parents. Soon, we are going to have a space for rocking chairs and sharing meals and the grace of time and space. With all do respect to the cliché the author gives us of "You make friends by being a friend, " there are four things that make a friendship: share a meal together, play a game together, swing a hammer together, sit in a rocking chair together until someone has something to say. That's how friendship is born, how family is nurtured: eat, play, work, linger. In the modern crisis of loneliness, friendship isn't a luxury, it's a need. Here will be space and time and intention and purpose for the kind of relationships that begin with a nod and word of welcome and head toward the sharing of life in God. 2 Corinthians expresses it this way, "everything we do is for your sake, so that grace when it has extended to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving to the glory of God. So we do not lose heart."

Three ways this project is family and friendship in brick and mortar: a gift to give and receive, a connection across generations, and space and time to belong.

We're on the way. Today, at the end of our service, we'll hear from our campaign leadership how far we've come so far and a little later in the meeting which follows worship, we'll hear more about the path ahead. For now, to mark a moment as spring turns to summer, as the rubber of a pledge campaign hits the road of contributions, to mark a moment, I say this: You belong. Come and have a meal. Throw a ball. Grab a tool. Sit a spell. Come to the table. Break the bread. Come and give and receive that Christ is with you. Trust God who will continue and complete the good work beginning in you now.

I pray a blessing on your summer: The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

For the world is too big for anything but truth and too small for anything but love. So may the Lord take your mind and think through it, your hands and work through them, and take your heart and set it on fire.

And may God use the gifts we bring, big and small, and use them together, to deepen our love for Jesus and to extend our life with one another and those who need a place and a moment to come away and rediscover who they are in Christ. Beloved. Children of God, in the family of God. Friends forged in grace.

Amen.

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