

Commentary on the Gospel for Tue, Jul 23rd 2013

The episode related in today's gospel is troubling for most of us, particularly if we take it as a repudiation of one's blood relatives. It occurs in three of the four gospels and hence has to be understood as something that the evangelists thought important for their particular communities to hear and understand. Remember John 21:25, "There are still many other things that Jesus did; yet if they were written about in detail, I doubt if there would be room enough in the entire world to hold the books . . ." and John 20:31, "But these have been written to help you believe . . ."

Kinship – family – is important in human society, and was the primary basis for inter-individual responsibilities in Eastern Mediterranean societies in Jesus' time. Even in many cultures today, while family members may quarrel with one another, they close ranks when criticized or threatened by an outsider. In this saying Jesus is not so much denying the reality of blood kinship, as he is broadening it. Members of Jesus' family (whose Father is God) have the same bonds of loyalty and responsibility to one another as did blood kin in Jesus' time. That's why Paul is so upset by Christians suing one another (1 Cor. 7:6). Kin may have disagreements, but they simply don't take one another to court. Even in our own litigious society fraternal suits are thankfully rare.

Paul doesn't stop there. Eleven times in his letter to the Galatians he uses the term "brothers". That was not a polite greeting – not like "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen". Paul was building on the fraternal relationships and obligations inherent in that term in Eastern Mediterranean society to get his Galatian converts to come to their senses. He was not just their founder or pastor. He was their brother and they owed him loyalty.

Jesus' family today is the assembly of all the baptized – all those who, in baptism, died with Christ and now live with the one Holy Spirit as their life. We may do a poor job of living that reality, just as our blood kin sometimes are poor family members, but we're all still family – Jesus' brothers and sisters. We have kinship obligations to one another.

We today tend to think of membership in the Church like membership in a political party or a professional association. That's quite wrong. You can opt out of those memberships, change your affiliation. But you can't opt out of your membership in family. It's a fundamentally different kind of thing. We're all vivified by the same Holy Spirit. Once baptized, while we can be a poor Christian, we can never again be a non-Christian – just as we can never be a non-member of our blood families.

There's opportunity here for dozens of Reflections, and each of us needs to ponder what that expanded

kinship means for us. One example to get you thinking: When we gather for Eucharist do we see ourselves as family members coming together for a family celebration (birthday, anniversary, Thanksgiving . . .), or are we more like customers entering a restaurant to satisfy our individual hunger needs. Do we sit apart from the others in a kind of chicken pox model of church, or do we gather around the table of the Lord as a family would? It is true that sometimes we need private time with God – need it desperately. But maybe family celebration is not the time or place for that . . .

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