Book 4

Sunday May 12, 1974

"OUR NEW AND LARGER FAMILY" Isaiah 11:6-9, Mark 3:31-35

Jesus hadn't been in the business of teaching and preaching very long before tensions and conflicts developed. This short passage just read from the Gospel of Mark, tells of some of these tensions within his family and the passage is set in the context of more tensions and conflicts among a wider circle of persons.

Look at the setting for a moment. Right before this incident in the Gospel of Mark, we are told that some of Jesus' friends thought he was "beside himself," out of his mind, and they had gone out to seize him and put him away. And then not long after that some Scribes who had come down from Jerusalem had accused Jesus of being able to cast out demons only because he was a demon himself and in league with the devil.

And then in this passage just read as our text, Mark tells us that Jesus' family had come to where he was teaching and preaching and that they had sent word through the crowd that they wanted urgently to talk with him. Perhaps they had come to try to persuade him to come back home with them, to forget all about this preaching business and to take up again the trade of being a carpenter.

It's not easy to have a member of one's family accused of being crazy and of being in league with the devil. Furthermore there is evidence in some of the other gospel accounts that Jesus' mother and brothers did not understand what he was trying to do. They did not like the changes that had taken place in him.

No doubt his family and particularly his mother were concerned about some of his new beliefs. After all, he was being critical of the religion of his father and mother, critical of the Temple, critical of many of the religious rules and traditions and it was on these same rules and traditions that his parents had been brought up and upon which they had raised him.

We know the feeling. Sometimes our parents and relatives and friends may have thought us to be a little out of our minds in some of the plans we have made or the things we have done, or the beliefs we hold. We are all familiar with the fact that our parents, relatives and friends have not always understood us or our motives, plans and actions--

our change in outlook. A person from a conservative family becomes a liberal in outlook, or the other way around. A person who has been raised as a democrat becomes a republican.

We often grow up and take on an outlook quite different from that of our immediate family. Thus tension often appears as the relationship within families and even in larger groups, tries to understand and come to terms with the many changes that necessarily comeabout as persons grow older and as conditions change in our culture. The Broadway musical and movie "Fiddler on the Roof" is about such problems.

And if we think the family of Jesus had problems or the family in"Fiddler on the Roof," our are compounded because of a number of additional forces at work in our time. One of these we are all familiar with is the impact of mobility. In our time we move from street to street and from city to city with incredible frequency. Pick any date in 1974, and by that same time in 1975, one American in five will have moved, bag and baggage to a new residence, leaving behind neighbors, friends, family members, tradespeople, church congregations and other associations.

Throughout history there have always been nomadic peoples, but usually in the past whole tribes or clans moved together.

The perpetual geographical motion is matched by movement up and down the economic and social scale. Each time we move, up, down, or laterally, we slough off some of our friends and acquaintances and form a new circle of human relationships and often with it, we adopt a new set of values and beliefs. Each of us today becomes associated with more people in one year than a feudal serf in the middle ages met in a lifetime.

Furthermore our lives are lived out in many communities at once. There is our commmunity at work, the neighborhood in which we live, our professional association, our social friends, and our extended family. In times past, these were for the most part all one and the same.

Thus in our time we can almost literally say as we grow up and move about--"who are my mother and brothers?" Here are my mother and brothers, wherever I happen to be living and working and playing.

Since we move about more and because we all come into contact with many different kinds of people, our values are formed by many forces in addition to our immediate families.

We have long been aware that many formerly family or tribal functions have been taken over gradually by schools, hospitals, the little league and many other forces. Add to this the influence of the media--movies, radio, television, books, magazines--all of which are continually having an influence on all of us no matter what our age.

The point is that in today's world, more and more forces outside of the immediate family grouping are continually affecting all of us, no matter what we might like to think or do.

Thus if we think Jesus' family had a problem trying to understand or counteract the changes that had taken place in him, our problem and our potential are greatly multiplied and compounded. Technology, enforced by both works and spirit, is clearly bringing about the collapse of much of what we think of as traditional culture and values. Jesus' mother was disturbed about the changes in her son after he left home at the age of 30. In our time, we see changes in our off-spring much earlier and the changes never stop but increase with intensity and speed.

Another way of putting it is that regardless at what age people physically leave homes and immediate family in our time, they leave the home and family in many other ways at a very early age. Much of a person's value system, his belief system, his action system, his way of looking at the world and at people is also formed outside the family, beginning at a very early age.

The fact is that we become part of a new and larger family, the family of the people of the world at a very early age. "Who are my mother and brothers?" Today, long before we leave home physically we have to say--almost all people in the world are my mother and brothers and sisters and they help mold me and influence me from the moment of my birth.

But there is even more to this story. The text is pointing us to the future and that future is more and more upon us. The text is saying that there is always something more than so-called blood relationships. The early Christians following Jesus realized this. Many of them had forsaken both

their own immediate family and their beloved synagogue. But they were not left alone. They saw the church as their new family, but it was not an exclusive church but an inclusive one which included all the people of the world as an ever broadening family. We sometimes tend to laugh at the old church fashion by which members called one another--"Sister Jones," or "Brother Brown," If we remember how the fashion came we will not laugh. The early church raised women to a new status. They were able to accept slaves as equals, to speak to Samaritans and pagans, to love enemies and strangers.

The new family Jesus was talking about, they saw as coming into being and it is still coming into being. We have not yet understood all people of the world as our new and larger family. Yet Paul in his letter to the Galatians, anticipated the future when he wrote -- "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." There is one family in all the earth.

Here as in other places in the Bible, humankind is identified as a biological unity unique among all the creatures of the earth, and set within the sweep of what we would today call cosmic evolution. The Apostle Paul evidently saw all cultures, known and unknown, as part of God's plan for bringing all people to that maturity of spirit by which they would seek after him and find his purpose hin the world.

Such a claim about one family and one world must've seemed preposterous to many of Paul's hearers, particularly when he got specific and pointed out that this meant Jews loving and accepting Gentiles and Gentiles loving and accepting and eating with Jews.

However in our increasingly complex and inter-dependent society, all people are literally becoming our brothers and sisters in fact as well as in theory. We are fast becoming one family. The barriers are all coming down--the old loyalties no longer fit--the loyalty to being a German, or an Italian, or a Jew, or a white person, or black person, or Asian, or European, or Presbyterian or Methodist. To be sure we are to be proud of and value our heritage, but we have to move beyond it.

The interdependence of all people is the new reality. Our communications systems, our economics, are relating all

people and nations to each other in a way not known before, just as the nervous system in the human body relates all parts of the body to each other. And we know from our own experience, whatever happens in one part of our body affects the rest of our body for good or for ill. So it is today with the world.

In a sense already today--all wars are civil wars. We can no longer destroy one part of the body of human-kind without injuring the whole. We hear more and more about famine throughout the world. We have to learn how to feed each other as brothers and sisters in the human race. All knowledge is human knowledge and with space satellites there are really no more secrets that one country can keep from another very long. If one country develops a new weapons system, soon all major countries have a similar system.

Recently with the Arab Oil embargo, we all became aware how much the world is economically knit together. Now a major recession or depression in any of the major countries of the world has its effects everywhere. Inflation, we are told by the economists is a world-wide problem and cannot be solved in one country without tackling it everywhere. More and more throughout the world, we are dependent on each other for survival.

Furthermore the growing inter-dependence of the world finally touches people's most fundamental beliefs. This change is harder to see because it takes place in the hidden regions of people's minds. But people cannot trade goods and knowledge without also grading ideas of what is good. We cannot share technical knowledge without sharing more than technicalities. And so a unity begins to develop at more profound levels.

Yet perhaps God is working in and through all of this. After all we Christians have always believed that the intention of creation embodied in Christ is the coming together of all people into a new life, a new unity--In Christ there is no east or west. Thus we in the church should hardly be surprised by the world so fast becoming one in fact. We have had a part in making it so from the very beginning. Part of the church's job in every age and particularly in our age is to remind all people that we are part of one family and to act on that basis.

The fulfillment of God's creation lies in this coming together of people into ever-new, ever-inclusive, ever-enlarging communities--a global village. This is the vision of our faith. We believe it is the will of God.

This does not mean that our immediate families or our nations or the other smaller groups of which we are a part are not important. They continue to be very important. In our families, for example, part of our responsibility is to prepare our off-spring to take responsible positions in the new and larger family of the people of the world and to have the kind of vision of a one-world humanity.

Our immediate families become the foundation, the basic building blocks of the new and larger family. Our churches also become all the more important as we try in our small way to be the model of this new humanity which God intends. We are already brothers and sisters in the human race and thus we need to act like it. This means very specifically in Lincoln, for example, welcoming the Indians into our community as they come here for justice. It is then that we are doing the will of our God.

The vision of a new and larger family is being given a new reality in our time. Our world is becoming more and more inter-dependent, and the vision itself begins with God. In our Old Testament lesson for this morning, for example, Isaiah saw the future of God's creation, the intention of God's creation as a place one day of complete peace and harmony of all creatures--listen!

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall feed. Their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the adder's den. They shall not hur or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. Amen.