



## Broad Street Presbyterian Church

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### “A Family Affair”

Mark 3:31-35

June 10, 2018

Reverend Amy Miracle  
Broad Street Presbyterian Church  
Columbus, OH

*Note: At the 10:00 a.m. service, Kyle, Charlyn and Atticus Bohland were baptized and we said farewell to Music Ministry Assistant and choir section leader Alissa Ruth.*

There are many heartwarming children’s books that are about families. And then there is the book entitled *Nobody’s Family Is Going to Change*. It was written about forty years ago by Louise Fitzhugh, the same author who gave us *Harriet the Spy*. The book tells the story of the Sheridan family, whose father is mean and disapproving and whose mom tries to smooth things over. There’s a son who wants to dance in a show but is told he can’t by his father and a daughter Emma, who is accused of daydreaming too much. She wishes that her family could be different.

Over the course of the book, Emma tries to get her parents to change, to listen to the kids, to act in new ways. And then, finally towards the end of the book, sitting at dinner, as her father and brother rehash the same fight that they always have, Emma realizes that her parents will never change. Her dad will always be harsh, her mom will always pretend that nothing is wrong, and she can’t change them and shouldn’t try. The best she can do is change herself.

It’s not what you expect in a book written for children. Or for adults, for that matter. But, it captures an important truth: families are complicated. Being in a family is rewarding, yes, but incredibly challenging. And, like the Sheridans, families tend to fall into patterns that aren’t always healthy or life giving. Families are complicated.

You wouldn’t necessarily know that from coming to church. Most churches most of the time talk about family life in a way that makes it sound uncomplicated and unambiguously good. In fact, churches compete with one another to be the most welcoming to families. I know of one church that invites your family to join their family in their family-friendly facility for some family-focused fun.

There is one big problem about putting the traditional family at the center of church life. So many of us aren’t a part of one. We may have been once but today, right here in this room, many of us are single or widowed or divorced. Some of us are unable to have children or are estranged from our children. There are some among us who have been hurt by our families—abused, rejected, suffocated. Many of us churchgoers don’t fit neatly into the traditional family.

And the reverse can be true. Religion isn’t always seen as a positive influence on families. I want to read you a letter sent by a concerned parent to a government official:

Dear Sir, you must do something about my son. He had such a promising future. I gave him everything he needed to succeed. He went to the best schools; he was headed for a good job as a lawyer. And then he got involved with a weird religious sect. Members of this sect control his every move, tell him whom to date and whom not to date, and have taken all his money. As you well know, this strange group is a

More sermons can be found online at <http://bspsc.org/AboutUs/SundayMorning/Sermons.aspx>

threat to our nation and a threat to the strength of the family. Please do something about this situation. Signed, an anxious father.”<sup>1</sup>

The identity of this strange sect? A new age cult? The Church of Scientology? No, this letter is a composite based on the actual letters of third-century Roman parents complaining about the Christian church.

Roman society had no more cherished value than its belief in the primacy of the family. Other than the military, marriage into a more superior family was the only means of social advancement, because your family determined your status in life.<sup>2</sup> In that culture, family was everything.

The church, on the other hand, was filled with parts of families—wife without husband, child without parents, brother without sister. The early church was simply following the example of Jesus. Take the time Jesus called as his disciples the sons of Zebedee. They left their father with the fishing nets and followed Jesus. This story doesn't say what their father thought about his two sons walking out of the family business and leaving the family home. Jesus broke the heart of many a first-century family.

In fact, he had a knack for saying things that weren't all that family-friendly. Like “I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother.” And “Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother, and wife and children, and brothers and sisters... can't be my disciple.” That's a text rarely used by the church on Mother's Day. “I'll follow you,” a man says to Jesus, “only first let me go give my recently deceased father a decent burial.” “Let the dead bury the dead!” replies Jesus. “Follow me and let somebody else do the funeral!”

And then there is today's story.

“Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside asking for you,” someone says. Jesus replies, “Who? Anyone who does my will is my family.”

Despite the seeming harshness of these words, Jesus and the early church did not reject the family as much as they expanded and transformed it. Family was no longer limited to a group of biological relatives but expanded to include any and all who shared an allegiance to Jesus as Lord. In a culture in which the biological connection was everything, the church said that there were ties that ran deeper than that.

For many of us that understanding of family rings true. Who is your family? You may first mention your family of origin—parents, siblings. Others will mention their spouse, others their children. Some of us will include in our definition of family people we aren't related to but we have chosen to make them a part of our family—friends that feel like siblings—mentors that act like surrogate parents—people who reach out to our children and feel like aunts and uncles and grandparents. There is the family that we are born into and there is also the family we choose.

The early church took this one step further. They went around claiming all sorts of people as family. Because in the family of the church, water is thicker than blood.

I'm speaking of the waters of baptism. Water is the key. In the waters of baptism, we are welcomed and loved and given new life in the family that is Christ's church. True, baptisms are and should be a special occasion for the family of the baptized. But, this sacrament is not a celebration of home and hearth. Baptism is all about this strange family that we call church.

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Stanley Hauerwas is reported as opening one of his classes at Duke Divinity School by reading this letter. William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*, p. 118-9.

<sup>2</sup> Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians*.

In many ways we are like other families—we share meals together, we argue, we fight, we laugh, we treat each other with indifference one day, with tender care the next. But, unlike other families, we are always searching for new brothers and sisters. At our best, this family welcomes with open arms anyone who wishes to know Jesus, regardless of race or age or sexual orientation or marital status or style of dress or educational level or political affiliation or any other category you can think of. At our best, we are recklessly inclusive.

At our worst, we haven't just failed to welcome people, we haven't just excluded people from the church, we have persecuted them. It happens to me more often than you might think. I meet someone socially and they find out that I am a minister, and then they start pelting me with questions. "How can you be a part of such an institution? Didn't the church support slavery? Doesn't it have a long history of anti-Semitism? What about the Crusades? And what about the clergy sex abuse scandals? How can you be a part of such a flawed institution?"

I long ago gave up defending the church because I can't. The fact is that I am horrified at some of the things that the church had done over the years in the name of God. The church has always been a frail and fallible institution filled with frail and fallible people and we have made horrible mistakes. Too often there has been an inexplicably large gap between what we profess and what we do; what we claim to believe and how we live our lives.

But sometimes... sometimes we get it right.

Presbyterian pastor Michael Lindvall writes out of his own experience as the minister of a small town church in rural Minnesota. In his book *Leaving North Haven* he tells about being a guest supply preacher for a little church in a little town called Carthage Lake. He writes,

The Carthage Lake church hasn't had a minister of its own since 1939. On the first Sunday of every month a handful of people gather at noon for Sunday school and worship with whatever preacher they can convince to come ... The Clerk of the congregation, Lloyd Larson, tells the supply preachers that there are only eleven members, but they'll all be there. And Lloyd Larson promises an organist, the same organist Carthage Lake has been promising guest preachers for 60-plus years, Lloyds' sister-in-law, Agnes Rigstad.

The Sunday of his guest appearance arrives. Lindvall writes,

There were actually twelve worshippers on this day scattered throughout the sanctuary, sitting in their customary pews. In the midst of the usual eleven elderly members there sat a young man. Lloyd had explained that there was no bulletin, that the preacher should do what he wanted and just announce the hymns when he thought appropriate. Worship began and Michael announced the opening hymn, #204, Spirit of God, Descend Upon My Heart. Agnes smiled at him and played "What a Friend We Have in Jesus." ... Following the sermon, Michael announced the next hymn, "Love Divine, All Love Excelling." He looked directly at Agnes who smiled back and played, "I Love To Tell the Story." After the prayers and offering, Michael walked over to the organ bench, bent down and whispered, "Agnes, what are we going to sing?" She smiled and began to play, "Just As I am, Without One Plea."

After worship, Agnes shook his hand but didn't say a word. Lloyd sheepishly explained: "Forgot to tell you about Agnes. You don't need to tell us what the hymn is, only when. Agnes only knows those three hymns, so we always sing them." "Good grief, Lloyd, you mean to tell me you've been singing the same three hymns for 60 years?" Lloyd was concentrating on the frayed sanctuary carpet. "We like those hymns well enough, and we know them by heart. And Agnes is our organist."

Later, Michael met the young man who was in worship. His name was Neil Larson and he was Lloyd's grandson. He explained to Michael, "Agnes is my late grandmother's little sister and she has never been quite right. She never says more than a few words but she learned to play those hymns in one week over 60 years ago when the regular organist got sick. It was a moment of musical emergency. Anyway, she hasn't been able to learn one since. Playing the organ this one Sunday a month means the world to Agnes. Sometimes I think it's mostly for her that they keep the church open. Aunt Agnes lives for the first Sunday of every month."

Neil continued to explain things to Michael.

"They asked me to play the organ, of course, they had to ask. But they knew I'd say no. I remember how my grandfather, Lloyd, sighed with relief when I said no."

"You're an organist?" Michael asked. "Eastman School of Music, class of 1984. I've had some big church jobs, the last one down in Texas, a big church with a brand new organ, 102 ranks. Four services a Sunday. Then I got sick. I've been HIV positive for six years. The personnel committee of the church figured it out, the weight loss, all the sick days, not married. They told me it would be best if I moved on, but not till after Christmas, of course. My parents live in St. Paul, but my father and I haven't spoken since I was 19. I'm not sick enough to be in the hospital, just too tired most of the time. I really had nowhere to go and my grandfather said I could move in with him and Agnes..."

Neil paused and went on, "They keep Agnes and they took me in. And since I moved up here, most every night my grandfather or old man, Engstrom, from down the road opens up the church for me. If it's cold, they lay a fire in the wood stove, and then I play the organ. It's a sweet little instrument, believe it or not, and they have kept it in good shape. These last few weeks it's been almost warm in the evenings, so they leave the doors and windows of the church open and everybody sits out on their front porch and they listen to me play - Bach, Buxtehude, Widor, all the stuff I love. And they clap from their porches, even Agnes claps."<sup>3</sup>

In the family of the church, there is room for all sorts of people. There is room for people who only know how to play three hymns, there is room for sons who have been rejected by their fathers. There is room for the healthy, for the dying, the compassionate and the heart broken. There is room for everyone and there is room for every part of our story.

We're an odd family. We are old and frail, young and confused, and everything in between. We are a strange, broken, joy filled group of people.

Kyle, Charlyn, and Atticus, we are your family. Alissa, even if you move to Nashville, we are your family.

Don't forget. Always remember. We are your family.

Amen.

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Lindvall, *Leaving North Haven: The Further Adventures of a Small-Town Pastor*, 2002