

Faces of Failure: Jesus's Family

Mark 3:20-21, 31-35

Have you ever noticed how some of those who should know Jesus best don't?

Take, for example, the people in his hometown of Nazareth. In Luke's Gospel, the people who saw him play in their streets and work in his father's shop are at first impressed with him. But when he returns to speak in the synagogue and suggests there is more faith among the pagans than among them, they became furious and try to kill him.

Or consider the disciples. They spend three years working with Jesus. They are there for all the key moments in his ministry, and yet when he tells them he is going to Jerusalem where he "must suffer many things, be rejected by the religious leaders and killed" they don't understand.

These are the people who should know Jesus best, but they don't.

Of course, the best example is his family.

To understand just how strange their response to Jesus is, you have to understand its context in Mark's Gospel. The point of this Gospel is to help people see that Jesus is "the Son of God," that he has a unique relationship with God, a relationship in which he shares not just God's divine nature but his authoritative power as well. But he doesn't do that as Matthew or Luke does, which is to tell of Jesus' conception and birth. Instead, he offers his readers and hearers hint after hint, culminating at the cross.

We see his strategy in the first three chapters of his Gospel. In these chapters, Jesus boldly begins to reveal who he is to the world. Now he never says, "Hey, look. I am the Son of God." But virtually every event between the beginning of this Gospel and his return to Capernaum hints at it.

When Jesus is baptized, we're told that "a voice came from heaven." It is, of course, the voice of God, and God says to Jesus: "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased."

When Jesus begins his ministry, he announces that "the kingdom of God is at hand." Jewish hearers and Mark's readers would have thought of Psalm 2, in which God says to the king: "You are my son; today I have become your father."

When Jesus teaches in the synagogue, people are amazed because he does so "with authority, and not as the scribes" and because he "commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him." In other words, he speaks and acts as God would.

When a leper implores Jesus to heal him, Jesus "stretches out his hand and touches him." In Jewish tradition, to touch a leper was to become unclean. But not for Jesus. He cleanses the leper, something only God could do.

When a paralytic is brought to Jesus to be healed, he tells him: "Son, your sins are forgiven." Those in the crowd were outraged. They knew Jesus's words were blasphemous because only God can forgive sins. And yet Jesus proves his power to forgive when he tells the man, "Rise, pick up your bed, and go home," and the man does.

And then Jesus claims authority over the Law God gave to Moses. First, when the Pharisees complain that his disciples are violating the Sabbath picking grain to eat, Jesus says, he “is lord even of the Sabbath.” Later, he heals a man with a withered hand despite the prohibition against doing such work on the day of rest.

By the time Jesus returns to Capernaum, he is clearly claiming to be the Son of God, to have a unique relationship with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to be not just a prophet like John the Baptist but the very presence of God in the world.

And while many people believe him—thus the crowd that surrounds him in Capernaum—his family doesn’t. Instead, they think he’s crazy. “Out of his mind,” the text says, which can mean either insane or even demon possessed. That’s why they leave their home in Nazareth, some 40 miles away, and walk all the way to Capernaum to “seize him,” “arrest him,” “forcibly restrain him.” Because they think he’s beside himself, they want to throw a net over him and take him away.

While you’d think that of all people, they would see that he’s the Son of God, they don’t.

Here he is, doing what only God can do, and people all over Galilee see it. But not his family. They choose not to see the signs that he is the Son of God because if they see them, they will have to change. No longer will Jesus be Mary’s son, he will be her Lord. No longer will Jesus be his siblings’ brother, he will be their Master. No longer will his family members be able to do what they want, they will have to do what he wants, which is nothing less than the will of God. So rather than change, they choose not to see that he is the Son of God. Their failure is not familiarity but willful blindness. And they are not alone.

When his mother, brothers, and sisters finally arrive in Capernaum, the crowds surrounding Jesus are so large that they are left standing outside the circle. So, they do what any of us would do: They send word that they are there and want to speak to him.

Family being family, particularly in that culture, one might expect Jesus to dismiss the crowd and rush off to see them. But he doesn’t. Instead, he redefines his family: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” he asks. ‘And gazing at those who sat around him, he says, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of God, they are my brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus redefines the family as those who do the will of God. They choose to see the obvious—that he is the Son of God, the one sent by God to reconcile a fallen humanity to its Creator, and that following him changes everything. No longer is their life their own; it is their Lord’s. No longer is their life to revolve around themselves, their families, their jobs, their parties. Their life focus, like Jesus’ life, is to “do the will of God,” to live every moment of every day attuned to God’s grace, word and Spirit.

What Jesus offers is a new life in a new family with a new purpose for those who open their eyes to see that Jesus is the Son of God.