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Crazy Family

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Pastor, preacher, and former bishop in the Methodist Church, Will Willimon, recounts a powerful moment from his early days in ministry. He tells about serving a small parish, although he doesn't say where, that had a men's prayer group that met every Wednesday morning. He recalls one particular Wednesday with this group that was....crazy. At least he feels it's crazy in the Gospel sense.

That particular morning, he asked the other members of the group to pray for him because he had a difficult day ahead of him. When they asked Will what was going to be difficult, he told them he had gotten a call that Johnny, a 17-year-old son of a member who was a single mother raising 3 children, had been arrested with a DUI and was in jail and his mother asked Will to go visit him. After a short silence, one member of the group offered to go along with him, because he had some experience Will did not. Then another member of the group offered to go too until a total of 4 men had volunteered to visit Johnny.

Will says when they arrived at the jail, a police officer led them through some confusing dark hallways to a small room where Johnny was sitting, looking alone and frightened. Will immediately started talking to Johnny and told him they were all there because his mother had called him, and they wanted him to know they cared. It was then that another member of the group gently pushed Will out of the way and said, "Johnny, we want to do more than care about you, we want to do something about this. How much is your bail?"

Johnny stammered something about someone saying bail was going to be somewhere between \$2000 - \$3000. The man was nonplused, nodded, and said not to worry they could raise it. Then another member asked Johnny how long he'd been an alcoholic. When Johnny said he didn't think he was an alcoholic, the man asked him, "How long have you been lying to yourself about being an alcoholic?" The man then said he had struggled with that same illness, and knew how hard it is, he also told Johnny he could help him. Then the other man spoke up and said, once bail was made, Johnny could stay with him and his family for a while, to give his mother and siblings a break, and to help create space to let Johnny work through all this.

Will remembers standing in the back, watching this all happen and thinking, it was Crazy. Meaning it was so different from what he had expected. And he was humbled that the people who knew what to do and how to help felt empowered to step up and do so. He said those men from the prayer group taught him a great deal about what it means to follow Jesus that day. And that too, seemed crazy. But while some might call it crazy, it was full of the life-giving stuff of Jesus: forgiveness, hope, healing, and renewal.

That same dichotomy seems to be at play in today's Gospel lesson. Where it sounded like so many people had something bad to say about Jesus. Today's Gospel mentions crowds who were calling Jesus insane or crazy in a way that appeared to have upset Jesus' family enough for them to come get him and attempt to restrain or control him. Incidentally, there are those who say that is what some people, including the church itself has been trying to do for centuries.

Then the scribes kicked it up a notch and called Jesus possessed by a demonic spirit, which means they were acknowledging Jesus' power, but were attributing it to something other than God.

What both groups were essentially doing was trying to stop Jesus from healing, preaching, and forgiving by discrediting him and his ministry by calling him crazy or possessed by evil. And they were doing such a good job even Jesus' family were worried and upset. It's not clear if his family believed what was being said or not, but they seemed keen to get Jesus to behave differently.

Jesus' response to his detractors was to tell a parable about the absurdity of their accusations. That his power is restraining evil, which might threaten anyone who benefited from the status quo. Jesus then responded to his family's attempt to stop him and bring him home by ignoring them, and calling anyone who does the will of God his family.

In Jesus' day that would have been as radical a statement as healing on the sabbath, because it broke with the traditional understanding of family. In Jesus' day, and in some places in the world to this very day, family is an intentional structure that provides stability, credibility, status, and wealth. In Jesus' day teenagers did not graduate from high school, leave the family "nest" to go to college or get a job, or enter the military and start a life of their own. In Jesus' day families worked together to support the family unit no matter their age. They were more like a clan or a tribe. People didn't leave their clan or tribe, they worked to support it and their family took care of them.

Which might make it difficult for those of us who follow Jesus today to understand how crazy Jesus' statement sounded. Because we don't see a whole lot of this attitude in our day. Oh, we might see a little here or there. It might show up when a bride chooses to keep her last name instead of taking on her husband's last name. Or when the head of a family is disappointed in the choices an adult child makes and decides to cut off communications. Or when an adult child disengages from a toxic or abusive family member and such choices are judged as "bad" for turning away from one's family. However, there are plenty of people who understand such choices and support them. Today we are well aware of the folks who find family, who find acceptance, forgiveness, support, in parishes, in groups of friends, in sororities or fraternities, political parties, or in other groups.

But I am not sure that Jesus was giving permission for us to live into family where we find it in today's Gospel. Jesus may have been saying something far more radical. I wonder if Jesus was talking about something that looked more like what Will Willimon discovered in a jailhouse. Jesus was talking about God's family. And God's family isn't made of people who look alike or are have the same last name, or belong to the same church or group. God's family is all of us who are brave enough, crazy enough, and loving enough to listen to God and follow Jesus in showing love to a world where there is so much pain and despair. A world that is so full of fear and anger the most common way to communicate seems to be through mean, snarky, cynical and accusing comments instead of honesty, hope, or kindness. A world that would easily write off Johnny before he was given a second chance. A world that criticizes any message that is positive and points to all the things that are wrong and bad and says preaching joy is out of touch with reality.

Yes, I know there is a lot to despair about. I know you don't need me to tell you about these things to learn about them. But we aren't the first ones to live in a world where there is pain, isolation, injustice and fear. Jesus lived among all that too. And his response to it was to heal, to forgive, to give hope, to restore people to wholeness, and community, especially the community of humans and God, what some call family, and then told those who follow him to the same. So, it shouldn't surprise us that people called Jesus crazy.

Jesus' response in today's Gospel might be his way of saying that if what he was doing was considered crazy, maybe the way "crazy" was defined needed to be changed. Jesus might have threatened the institutions of power of his time, but to so many people he brought life. He did not go around intentionally harming people, he didn't take lives, he gave them. He liberated them. And if that is crazy, the Most Rev. Michael Curry, our Presiding Bishop preached in his sermon at the 2012 General Convention of the Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, then what we need, especially in this day and age, is more crazy Christians. People crazy enough to love when it is so easy to hate. People crazy enough to forgive when it is so easy to hold grudges. People crazy enough to give when its considered better to take. People crazy enough to speak up when its easier to be quiet. People crazy enough to explore new ways to minister when its much more comforting to stay stuck remembering the way things have always been done.

Bishop Curry's point in his sermon was to appropriate the word crazy, a word used to put down and discredit people to this very day and lift it up to show that what the world puts down, God raises up, because that is how shows love.

Bishop Curry's appropriation of the word crazy should also make us stop and think before we use that word to describe anyone struggling with any illness, especially mental illness. As we learn more and more about mental wellness, we are discovering that like physical wellness, mental wellness is more like a continuum rather than a static way of being. Which means from time to time we all will struggle with some form of mental illness, just we all will struggle from time to time with physical illnesses. So, I want to be clear today is when I use the word crazy I am not intending to speak ill of anyone dealing with mental illness, because these are folks who are part of God's family. If I use the word crazy to describe them I do so in the same way Bishop Curry used the word: to describe someone brave enough to love and forgive, to live as followers of Jesus.

Which means today's Gospel might be about God's inclusion being far more powerful than any label we can affix to any person or group of persons. And if someone calls followers of Jesus a derogatory term, it gives us an opportunity to see if what we are doing falls in line with Jesus' life-giving intentions, and if so, then it be true that every family is a little bit crazy, and God's family is no exception. And in these days, that might just be what we all need.