

A new family (Mark 3:20-35)

Yes, Jesus is possessed—by a new vision of what it means to live in community and in relationship with God.

by [Jeanne Choy Tate](#)

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With a sweeping gesture to enfold all those inside the house into his new family—the disciples and the crowds pressing in on him—Jesus excludes his biological family standing outside the door. “Who are my mother and my brothers? ... Here are my mother and my brothers!” Jesus comes across as hostile, shockingly harsh—almost anti-family.

If Jesus’ treatment of his family shakes our modern sensibilities, I can only begin to imagine its impact on his hearers—given the Jewish emphasis on family as the center of religious practice. For generations, Hebrews had understood salvation to be transmitted through birth into a Hebrew family. Marriage and procreation were seen as the highest of blessings. And here comes Jesus proclaiming a new family defined as those who seek to do God’s will—whatever their family or kinship background.

If our historical picture is correct, Mark’s audience had already left behind their families, clans, and local religious communities out of political and economic necessity. They were city dwellers cut off from the support of their families and home communities. In the multicultural city, pagans, Jews, Christian Jews, and gentile Christians rubbed shoulders on a daily basis. If the crowds who surrounded

Jesus felt like outsiders to their home communities, Jesus is now inviting all those who live fragmented lives—far from the support of family and clan—into a family transformed, where they will be insiders at the core of a new community. To a people torn from their roots, this must have been a welcome message.

Did you notice that when Jesus refers to his new family, he does not draw on the dominant patriarchal model? Instead he takes his model from the nurturing mother-child relationship and the more egalitarian relationships of siblings.

His family thinks he's crazy, and the scribes claim he is possessed by Satan. Indeed Jesus is possessed by a new vision of what it means to live in community and in relationship with God. Rather than rejecting family as a value, Jesus is re-claiming it from its traditional cultural and institutional underpinnings. His vision is based on relationships of nurture and equality.

The #MeToo and #TimesUp movements have shaken our social institutions with their revelations of sexual abuse and gender inequity throughout institutional culture. They seek to exorcise not just sexual abuse but a whole system of gender privilege buried deep in the structure of our society. The church, however, which is itself firmly grounded in patriarchal tradition, has been mostly silent. Yet a 2016 PCUSA survey found that 84 percent of female pastors said they have experienced discrimination in the church. Only 48 percent of male respondents said that they see gender inequity as a problem.

What would the church look like if it were built upon Jesus' model of family transformed—of community where nurturing and egalitarian relationships are given priority? What if our corporate Christian body were less corporate and more nurturing? How might our program priorities shift? What if our meetings were structured to create a community of brothers and sisters, mothers and nurturing fathers? How might we do committee work differently? Would we even have committees?

If we actually lived into Jesus' vision of family, how would the church of today be different?