

“CLASSIC TV AND FAITH: II – THE MARY TYLER MOORE SHOW

‘WE ARE FAMILY’”

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Mark 3:31-35

Have you been to a family reunion lately? It’s interesting that in the past few days I’ve talked to a couple of people who have not one, but two family reunions to go to this summer. One of those persons is a clergywoman I know, and she laughed when she told me that, inadvertently and unbeknownst to each other, she and her husband had both told their individual families they would host the annual family reunion. So now, within a period of a month, my poor friend is having two major gatherings of people from all over the country. Talk about a logistical nightmare! But oh what fun it will be for them – seeing brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, grandparents, great-grandparents, new babies – what fun!

There is a family reunion, of a sort, in today’s Gospel lesson, but it’s not exactly a joyful occasion, for several reasons. Jesus had just started his public ministry. He had chosen his disciples, they had started moving about the town, and Jesus had started speaking, and doing things. And the reaction to Him was not great. People were questioning who he was, and if, well, He was sane. He was coming under fire from many different directions.

So His family comes to his rescue, or, at least tries to. They’ve heard what’s being said about Jesus, so they come to the house where a crowd has gathered around him. They couldn’t get in the door, so they sent word that His mother and brothers and sisters were there for him. What happened next was a bit shocking.

Jesus replied, “Who are my mother and brothers?” Then he looked at those sitting around Him, and said, “these are my family. Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!”

When he uttered those words, Jesus redefined the word family – or maybe, more accurately, He adds to the word family. In that day and age, families were extremely strong and extremely tight. It was a very patriarchal society, and many generations of family would live together. Those families were blood, biological families – mother, father, children, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

So when Mary and the rest of Jesus' family showed up, the people knew exactly who they were – they were His biological, nuclear family. They were the ones who brought Him into the world, who held onto His hand as He learned to walk, who nurtured Him, taught Him a trade, sat with Him around the dinner table, and prayed the prayers of faith with Him. They were Jesus' family – in the traditional sense of the word.

And He loved them dearly – always had, always would. They did for Him what good family members do, and from the very beginning. At the very beginning, Jesus had two earthly parents who chose to have Him in their lives. Both of His parents, Mary and Joseph, said “yes” when God called them to bear Jesus into the world. When everyone would have understood if either of them had said “no,” instead they said “yes.” So Jesus was a very wanted and very loved child.

Throughout his childhood, they did what families do. They protected Him – early on, when they escaped through Egypt after His birth to save His life. They nurtured Him, and taught Him – the things of faith and the things of life – Joseph taught Him the trade of carpentry. They stayed with Him through so much – through His growing up years, and then during His ministry – and even at the end, at the cross, there was Mary, His mother. They suffered with Him – hearts breaking as they watched how people turned on Him, and watched Him be falsely accused and convicted, and cruelly put to death on the cross.

Jesus couldn't have asked for a better nuclear family – they were the best that families can be – loving, caring, protecting, nurturing, long suffering, persevering, compassionate, supportive. So, in no way, was Jesus making a comment about the love and regard He had for His family in this lesson, rather He was saying that that wonderful family love could also, and *is* also, experienced in other ways.

Sometimes, for instance, our friends are family for us. Such was the case for Mary Richards, the lead character in today's classic television show - The Mary Tyler Moore Show. I don't know how many of you watched it when it ran a number of years ago. I know not as many of you as watched *I Love Lucy*. So let me tell you a little bit about it before we watch the clip.

Mary Tyler Moore played Mary Richards, a woman who moved to Minneapolis to work at a television station as an associate producer. She was a single woman who lived in an apartment building, where there was a strong-willed landlady named Phyllis who was always butting into everyone's business, and another single career woman, who became Mary's best friend – her name was Rhoda.

Working with Mary at the station was a wonderful cast of characters – her crusty boss, Lou Grant; another associate producer, Murray Slaughter, who worked at the desk next to Mary's; an ego maniacal newsman named Ted Baxter; and a food show host, named Sue Ann Niven, played by the still-on-television at 90, Betty White.

For seven seasons, this wonderful group entertained us. What you're going to see now is a clip from the very last show of the series. It's actually the very last scene of the very last show. So turn now to the screen and take a look.

Last scene of the Mary Tyler Moore show.

For Mary Richards, those with whom she worked everyday, were her family. You heard what she said, "What is family? People who make you feel less alone and really loved."

Mary had moved away from her biological family, and it was these dear people, her friends where she lived, and her friends with whom she worked, that became family to her – they indeed "made her feel less alone and really loved."

Jesus certainly knew about that kind of family – about friends who become your family. He was surrounded by them, twelve men that we know by name, and also some women, Mary, Martha and Mary Magdalene among them. They really

loved Him, and I'm sure there were countless times in His journey that they made Jesus feel less alone.

And yes, like family members since time began, they occasionally disappointed Him, let Him down. Friends aren't perfect. Family members aren't perfect. But that didn't keep Jesus from loving them, nor did it keep them from loving Him. They hung in there with each other. They were family.

Who is your family? Besides the one into which you were born, or in which you live today, who is your family? Is it those with whom you work, or a group of girlfriends you've had forever, or the guys with whom you play baseball or golf? Who is it in your life that makes you feel less alone, that makes you feel loved? They're family for you.

So you have your biological family, and you have family with friends – but there's one more family – a very important one – and it's the one Jesus was really talking about that day – the family of faith. “Whoever does the will of God.”

You and I are brothers and sisters – we are family. The church is family. We are united in our common belief in, love for, and commitment to Jesus Christ. We are bound inextricably together.

That should come as no surprise to any of you who have been in this church for any length of time. Actually, all you need to do is come into this room before worship on any given Sunday, and you'll see family in action. People greeting each other with hugs, kisses, handshakes; people asking how things are going; people showing pictures of loved ones; people making dates to do things together. It's like a family reunion every Sunday.

When it's at its best, the church does what families do – cares, nurtures, protects, loves, challenges, forgives, perseveres. We pledge to help raise children alongside their parents as they are baptized. We provide a safe place for all people to come and learn and grow in their faith. We walk with people as they ask questions and sometimes go through periods of doubt. We hold the hands of those who grieve and pray for those who are hurting. We make meals for those who need a little extra help after a hospitalization or death. We stand side by side and repair homes for those in need. We see gifts in each other and encourage the use of those

gifts. We remind each other, through both word and deed, that each of us is a precious, beloved child of God. We are family. The church is family.

That's what Jesus was saying that day. We are more than just people meeting together to do the things of faith. We are connected, we are joined together because of our love for Jesus Christ, and by our intention to always seek and do the will of God. We are family, and we are so blessed to be family.

I often say that I don't know how people get through tough times in their lives without the church and a church family. But more than that today, I want to say how sad it is for those who aren't a part of a church family – because they don't know what they're missing, do they?

They don't know the joy of someone being genuinely happy to see you in worship, or what it feels like when someone calls because they've missed seeing you for a few weeks, and they want to know if everything's okay.

And they don't know what it feels like to be prayed for when you really need it, or how blessed it is to be constantly praying for others by name – how connected it makes you feel.

And they don't know how good it feels to work side by side with others at church to do some pretty great things – whether it's teaching Sunday School, or singing in the choir, or renovating the hospitality area, or giving out water at the fireworks, or working together to give tremendous amounts of time and energy to mission projects. They just don't know.

And they don't know what it feels like to be reminded every week – through worship and through the love of fellow church members, that they are forgiven and freed by the love of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was right – the church is a very special family, of which we are all a part. So no matter whether you have a biological family with whom you are close, or a family of friends who surround you, you and I always have the family of faith – this church family.

Thanks be to God for families – in all different configurations. They are, literally, gifts from God. Like Mary Richards said, they makes us feel less alone and really loved. So cherish the families of which you are a part – they are indeed signs of God’s bountiful love and amazing grace for you and for me. Thanks be to God!

Amen.