

“Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy – Part One”

Matthew 7:9-12; Matthew 12:46-50 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
Vista La Mesa Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), La Mesa, California – October 11, 2020

*Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that we might enter into your family of
boundless love. In Jesus' name, Amen.*

Today we're beginning a five-week sermon series called "Friend, Neighbor, Stranger, Enemy". I want to get started by explaining why we're doing this. There are a couple of reasons layered one on top of the other. First of all, in case you hadn't noticed our nation, and indeed our world, are going through a time of extreme political division. People on different places of our political spectrum can barely talk to each other, let alone strive to understand each other's perspective. We're not even working from a shared set of facts about the current state of the world. Opposing camps have moved farther and farther apart and hardened their boundaries. Many of us are struggling to imagine the "other side" as having any redeemable qualities, and others are swallowing a lot of inner turmoil and keeping our mouths shut in order to maintain relationships with people we have considered friends.

Meanwhile, we're about nine months into a global pandemic, which has had two contradictory impacts. On the one hand, it has pushed most of us into a more isolated existence, cutting us off from regular face-to-face contact with the people we used to see all the time and even just with random strangers in the grocery store or mall. But on the other hand, the constant reminders about the safety precautions we

need to be taking are continual reminders of how connected we are to everyone else, and how our behavior impacts others, whether we know them or not. It seems like an important time to reflect on what our faith tells us about how to relate to our fellow humans.

The title of this series implies that there are four major categories into which we sort the other people in our lives. The lines between friends, neighbors, strangers, and enemies are fuzzy sometimes, and certain people may shift categories from time to time or even be in more than one at once. I found myself wondering this morning how you say “frenemy” in Hebrew! But before we get too deeply into those four categories, I want to spend a little time with the most obvious category we left out of the series title. There is another kind of relationship in our lives, one that may be the most likely place for us to experience love like the love God has for us and yet may also be the most likely relationship to obscure the gospel. This relationship, of course, is family.

Our relationships within our families are often the ones that have the most impact on who we are and how we live our lives. Some of that influence is so deeply embedded in us that we don’t even realize how it shapes us. So before we address those other categories, we need to look at this one a little. Honestly, we could spend an entire five weeks on this, because the Bible is All Over The Place when it comes to family. Of course, there is the continual refrain throughout the Hebrew scriptures and echoed in the New Testament to “honor your father and mother”. But there are

also verses about how and when to stone your children for various offenses, and a multitude of stories about different families relating to one another in less than healthy and holy ways.

If we narrow our focus to the gospels, we've still got a lot of contradictory information. The Holy Family seems quite charming, if challenged, in the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke. Then there's the story of 12-year-old Jesus staying behind in the temple in Jerusalem, unbeknownst to his parents and then sassing them about it when they came back and found him, because of course he had to be in his Father's house. There is the poignant "Here is your mother – Here is your son" scene, in John's telling of the crucifixion. And then there are the passages we read today. The verses Katie read from Matthew 7 seem to imply that Jesus understands that, even though we're "evil" – that is, not very good at relationships or generosity or caring for each other in general – even we humans tend toward selflessness when it comes to doing what we can for our children. The fact that Jesus uses the word "Father" or even "Daddy" for God most of the time implies a certain appreciation for the strength and intimacy of such bonds.

But then we have this incident recorded in Matthew 12, which is quite distressing for many people. I get the feeling the gospel writer found it as shocking as we might, because of the way the first part is repeated. The narrator tells us that Jesus' "mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him." And the very next line has someone saying that again, word for word: Jesus, "your mother

and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you.” The weight of that repetition seems as though it ought to break into whatever had been happening and demand precedence, doesn’t it? But what does Jesus say? “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And then he answers the question himself. It’s not those people standing outside, wanting to speak to him. “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.”

This re-definition of family is a radical departure from our normal assumptions. Quite frankly, very few Christians throughout history have incorporated this teaching into their community standards. If we want to turn to the Bible for family advice, we’re much more likely to go with “honor your father and mother.” But this story is here, and it points us toward some important truths about our faith.

Who is my mother, and who are my brothers? What does it mean to us to be related like that? Is it fair to say that family is where we feel the strongest sense of obligation? In many families, though not all, closeness is reiterated by resemblance, whether in body, personality, habits, or other aspects of identity. In many cultures, traditions and mores have developed precisely to hold family units together, which could lead us to suspect that family resemblance is not as strong a force as we might otherwise believe. And yet, whatever the structure and history of our families, we know those dynamics are powerful, both inside our hearts and coming at us from outside influences. Someone can have the worst possible relationship with a parent – abusive, manipulative, cruel, neglectful, whatever – and at some point, someone will

say, “yeah, but he’s still your dad; you can’t change that.” A child may make terrible, self-destructive, selfish decisions, over and over and over again, and some may counsel “tough love”, but our heart’s desire to forgive and help our baby will almost always betray our brain’s awareness that setting and holding boundaries would be better for everyone.

These are the relationships that have the most potential to cause us pain, because they are the most fundamental. These cultural assumptions about the obligations we have to people, because of our blood relation to them, weigh especially heavy on those whose family relationships are unhealthy. Those whose family structures are mostly healthy, sources of joy and fulfillment, might seem to be getting along better, but that is when there is the highest likelihood that family will be prioritized over the gospel.

Because here’s the thing: I’m going to give away the punchline of this five-week series right here at the beginning. If we look at the biblical witness as a whole, family is either not a legitimate category at all, or it’s a category that includes everyone, which makes it rather useless to call it a category. In the end, we will see that God’s call to us is to treat everyone – friend, neighbor, stranger, and enemy alike – like family. Can you imagine having the sense of an unbreakable bond that we usually have with family in all your relationships? That sense of absolute obligation to love and forgive and offer the benefit of the doubt? As the disciples said, probably more than once, to Jesus, “This is a hard teaching, Lord!”

Over the next weeks, as we explore these other categories we like to sort people into, we will do well to consider how they connect with our sense of family. Why do we consider some people friends and family, but others just friends? What happens when our neighbors are our enemies, and how would that be different if we were related by blood? What about those who grew up feeling like strangers in their own families? How does scripture both recognize the distinctions between these various categories but also blur the lines between them when it comes to how we treat them?

In these times when we may have too much togetherness with the family in our homes and too much absence from the parts of our family in other places, we have a good opportunity to reflect on why we place the lines of family where we do. As we navigate these contentious times, we must strive to continually recognize and live out our enduring connection to the rest of humanity – family, friends, neighbors, strangers, and enemies. This is the transformative work God’s love is inviting us into. By the power of Christ’s compassion, we can live as family with all. Hallelujah and Amen.