

## **The Family of God in This Place**

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Mark 3:20-35

*A Sermon Preached for Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky*

Sunday, June 6, 2021

On the morning of April 5, 1968, the day after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, a young boy walked into his third grade classroom in Riceville, Iowa and asked his teacher a question. "Mrs. Elliot," he said, "I heard they shot that king yesterday. Why did they shoot that king?"

The truth is, ever since she heard the devastating news about King's assassination, Jane Elliot wondered how on earth she should respond with her class of all white students. And so, that day at the beginning of class, Mrs. Elliot asked the blue-eyed children to sit on one side of the room, and the brown-eyed children to sit on the other. She then pulled out construction paper armbands and told each of the blue-eyed kids that they had to wear one. "The brown-eyed people are the better people in this room," she said calmly but sternly that morning. "They are cleaner, and they are smarter."

Some of the kids were smiling with puzzled looks on their faces, wondering if this were some kind of joke. She knew that the children weren't going to buy into her pitch unless she came up with a good reason, so she wrote the word, MELANIN on the board. "Eye color, hair color and skin color are caused by a chemical in our bodies called Melanin," she said. "And Melanin is what causes intelligence. The more melanin, the darker the person's eyes, and the smarter the person."

"Blue-eyed people just sit around and do nothing. You give them something nice and they just tear it up," she said, and she could already feel a tension forming in the room. Mrs. Elliot then began to share some of the rules for the day, saying blue-eyed kids couldn't play with brown-eyed kids on the playground, only brown-eyed kids could have seconds at lunch, and brown-eyed children would also get 5-extra minutes of recess.

When she said that blue-eyed kids had to use paper cups if they drank from the water fountain, one blue-eyed girl raised her hand and asked why. "Because we might catch something from you" a brown-eyed boy said almost immediately. Everyone looked at Mrs. Elliott, and she nodded in agreement.

As the day went on, brown-eyed kids quickly began to criticize their blue-eyed classmates. When a smart blue-eyed girl who never had problems with math started making mistakes, a brown-eyed student blurted out, "Well, what do you expect, Mrs. Elliott? She's a bluey!"

That afternoon, one student asked, "Mrs. Elliott, how come you're the teacher if you've got blue eyes?" Before she could even think of a response, another brown-eyed boy piped up and said, "If she didn't have blue eyes, she'd probably be the principal or the superintendent."

Over the course of the experiment, Elliot says that "the children with brown eyes were suddenly more confident — and condescending. The children with blue eyes made silly mistakes and became timid and despondent." And the stories could go on and on.

When it was all finally over, and Mrs. Elliot explained to the children that there was absolutely no difference between blue-eyed and brown-eyed children, some of the kids walked across the room and hugged. Many of them cried. And years later, none of them has forgotten what has since been called “one of the most astonishing exercises ever conducted in an American classroom.”<sup>1</sup>

Well, today’s Scripture reading isn’t about blue-eyed and brown-eyed people, but it is about insiders and outsiders. And the way Jesus treats outsiders as insiders actually gets him a lot of flak.

As we begin this passage in Mark’s gospel, Jesus is surrounded by crowds of people, which is often the case for him, except when his own family hears about it, they claim that he must be out of his mind. Similarly, the religious leaders are upset by Jesus’ behavior as well, saying that he must be possessed by some sort of demon. But all that Jesus is doing here is spending time with a crowd of people - what about this would have been so scandalous?

Furthermore, this is early on in Mark’s gospel. And if you look back at chapters 1-2, you’ll notice that Jesus hasn’t even done that much yet. He has preached one sermon, called the disciples, cast out a demon or two, and he’s healed a bunch of people. So why in the world is Jesus getting so much flack?

If you look more closely at these chapters, you’ll notice that just about everything Jesus does is pushing against the boundaries of social customs and religious traditions in some way. For instance, one of the people he calls as a disciple is a tax collector – someone whom the religious authorities would have despised. And then Jesus has the audacity to have dinner with a bunch of tax collectors, which causes all the religious leaders to squirm. Jesus also has no qualms about healing folks on the Sabbath, which shows he always put people before religious practice, and he isn’t caught off guard in the least when he is approached by a man with a horrible skin disease in need of healing – even though most people wouldn’t have gone anywhere near him.

As Bible scholar David Loose points out, even three chapters into the Gospel of Mark, “Jesus has already shown [us] that the kin-dom of God is rooted in a profound inclusivity that lets neither religious law nor social custom prevent him from reaching those in need with the abundant life he came to offer.”<sup>2</sup>

And even when his very own family just doesn’t get it - he continues to set a table wider than they could possibly imagine. Strangely enough, at the end of today’s text, it says that his family, his mother and brothers, are standing “outside,” and he turns toward the people inside who are seated around him and says, “You all my family now.”

As I reflected on this passage from Mark’s gospel this week, I was struck by the similarities between what so many of our LGBTQ siblings have experienced and how Jesus is treated in this passage. The

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/science-nature/lesson-of-a-lifetime-72754306/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/06/pentecost-2-b-offering-a-wide-welcome/>

religious leaders completely misunderstand the way Jesus loves and they call him evil and unclean. His own family is even embarrassed of him and the attention he draws from the crowds.

Interestingly enough, Erica Lloyd points out that just like Jesus does here, “queer people in the early 80’s who were ostracized from their families of origin began to popularize the idea of “chosen families,” friendships in which deep intimacy, commitment, and responsibility of care made them become a kind of family for one another. These relationships became all the more important as the AIDS crisis escalated,” she says. “When biological relatives failed to care for people living with HIV, chosen family stepped in. “Chosen family” gave language to this innate human capacity [we have] to create and nourish ties that bind us together.”<sup>3</sup>

I believe that when Jesus looked around to this rag-tag group of people who had begun following him, he saw within them the potential to become something like that. And Highland, I must say that when I look around this community of people, when I look you in the eyes – some of you for the very first time, I see within you the very same thing.

Of course, just like any other family, I can’t promise you that your chosen family won’t ever disappoint you or let you down. Every church is filled with human people AND human pastors, and even the best of churches can get messy and complicated. Highland is no exception.

But what I can tell you is that I believe that we as the church can covenant together and aspire to become a new kind of family to one another, like the one Jesus is talking about here. A family where ALL are truly welcome – with no exceptions. And a family where the table just keeps getting longer.

Many of you have told me stories of how you have experienced family in this place. Through the love and care and radical welcome of people who make Highland feel like home.

People like Dottie Adams Frank come to mind. Kathey Golightly Sanders told me that Dottie was like a second mom to her. She said, “Dottie was the director of the singles Sunday School department when I was in seminary, and she recruited me to teach after I joined Highland. For years, she would have the teachers over to her condo on Saturday mornings for breakfast pastries, coffee and fruit on her beautiful china. And each Saturday, we would write that week’s Sunday School lesson while sitting around Dottie's dining room table.

Later, in some of my more difficult days, I truly did not know if I believed in God at all, and if so, I was convinced that God could not possibly use me. But in those days, Dottie held my faith in trust until I could claim it again as my own. She had faith in and for me.”

Randy Beiry told me, “I was raised in the Church of Christ. And though I struggled with drugs and alcohol addiction in my teens and twenties, I spent most of my first forty years in that church. But when my first marriage failed, and when I really needed that church, I was told that I wasn’t welcome. I

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<sup>3</sup> <https://inwardoutward.org/chosen-family/>

didn't return to a church service for twenty years, until Allyson invited us to attend my grandson Milo's dedication at Highland. Shortly after we attended again for our second grandson Charlie's dedication.

We kept coming back, and eventually I stumbled upon Friday church. And there I felt I belonged. With others who were just as broken as I was. With others who had been made to feel unworthy and unwelcome. With others who were struggling to put two consecutive sober days together. With others who had been made to feel ashamed. And with others who might just be beginning to believe that God loves even me.

I don't have a dramatic moment to share or even a singular person to cite. But I do know that Friday church is my family. I will always have them to comfort me and to walk with me, and I will always walk with them."

And Kim Clark-Endicott told me that when she and Diane started coming to Highland, on their first Sunday, a very nice older couple immediately introduced themselves. Then the following Sunday, this couple tapped us on the shoulder and invited us to their Messengers Bible study group. We kindly said "no, but maybe next time." And for the next I don't how many Sundays, this couple spoke to us and invited us to their Bible study class. Each time we kindly said no.

Then one Sunday they didn't invite us and we looked at each other and said, "Let's surprise them and go to their class." The couple I am referring to is Jim and Gloria McBee. They are two of the kindest, most persistent and caring people we have ever met. From the moment we walked into Highland they made us feel welcome, included, and that we belonged."

Highland, there are so many more stories I could share – and I will continue to share them in the weeks ahead. The point is, we already have it within us to be this kind of family to one another. We can see snapshots of family all over this place.

But especially as we come out of this pandemic, as many of us begin gather together for the first time in 15 months, as others continue watching from home – I believe that we need to be this kind of chosen family for one another now more than ever before. From our youngest to our oldest people and everyone in between, if the last year has taught us anything at all, it's how desperately we need each other.

And I believe that Highland has the unique capacity to be family for people in ways that few other churches are actually willing to do. The question is – are you and I ready to live this out? And are we even ready to get some flack for the ways in which we live as the family of God in this place? You see, I don't think the question we should ask of this text is "Why is Jesus getting so much flak?" Instead, I think the question we should ask is, "why aren't you and I getting more?" Or as David Lose puts it, "Why aren't we pushing the boundaries of what's socially and religiously acceptable in order to reach more folks with the always surprising, often upsetting, unimaginably gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus?"

Because the thing is, Jane Elliot did get flack. Lots of it. Not long after the experiment, word traveled across the country, and Mrs. Elliot flew to New York City to be on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. In response, hundreds of viewers wrote angry letters saying Elliott's work appalled them. "How dare you try this cruel experiment out on white children," one said. "Black children grow up accustomed to such behavior, but white children, there's no way they could possibly understand it..and it will cause them great psychological damage."

When she got back to school the next Monday and walked in the teachers' lounge, almost every other teacher walked out. Her own children began to be bullied at school, and her oldest son was beaten up. When Jane called the mother of one of the boys who did it, she simply said, "Your son got what your family deserves."

Even years later, in 2003, a reporter went with Jane back to Riceville to visit her old school. When they walked in the office, the secretary looked as if she had seen a ghost and mumbled that the school was closed due to waxing the hallways and that they couldn't come in. The reporter said, "We just need a couple of minutes. I don't know if you recognize her, but this is Jane Elliot; she taught in this school for 18 years." The secretary replied, "I know who she is." The reporter was stunned, but Jane wasn't surprised at all.

But as they walked downtown that day, and a woman in her mid-40's approached them on the sidewalk and said, "Ms. Elliot, is that you?" It was Matilda Whisenhunt, who had been in her class in 1969. With tears streaming down her cheeks, Matilda said to her, "Ms. Elliot, I've never forgotten the exercise. It changed my life. Not a day goes by without me thinking about it. When my grandchildren are old enough, I'd give anything if you would share it with them, too. Would you? Could you?" And tears streamed down Ms. Elliot's face, too.

Friends, may each and every one of you know the always surprising, often upsetting, unimaginably gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus.

May that love be known in this space, here at this corner of Grinstead and Cherokee and beyond, in ways that are tangible, and real. And in ways that even get us flack from time to time.

And together, as we live in this kind of love, may we continue to become a chosen family to one another. May we become the family of God in this place. Amen.