

I have a friend, an older gay man who lives in a small village in the Midwest. Until recently he was only out person in his village—population less than 500. He was caring for his father. When his dad died recently, I tried to send him some good whiskey. Turns out you can't order online spirits and send them where he lives. So I called the local liquor store—asked if I could pay over the phone and if they could deliver, mentioning my friend's name. The older gentleman said, "I'm the village President, and I hadn't heard that his father died. I know right where he lives. I'll have my daughter call you tomorrow to get your credit card info—I don't mess with cell phones, she'll let know how to do that." OK. Village life: everyone knows everyone.

Same size as the village of Nazareth when Jesus and his family lived there. Just before pandemic I traveled to holy land with Julia and her Episcopopeeps. We visited a private excavation site in Nazareth, a family dwelling from that period. It was something to stand in a place it's quite likely he ran around in as a little boy, like some of your kids cooped up at home. It made the reality of his family life real. Emily spoke of kinship last Sunday... may your kinship come.

I know so many of you are experiencing intensified family tension, or village tension, if we think of our village as our extended family, the people we grew up with or the 500 people our FB feed. I don't need to rehearse the reasons for this. Many of you may feel your family or your village is inhabiting what feels like an alternate reality, a nationalist cult, mindlock.

The gospels depict Jesus in a state of profound alienation within his village, including his own family. The idealization of "holy family" (May Joseph Jesus —especially in Christmas carols and creche scenes...all obscure how conflicted he was within in his own family and his village.

What do we know of his family? Many are surprised to know the gospels mention six siblings—four brothers, James, Joses, Simon, Jude, and two (as usual) unnamed sisters (Mark 6, Mt 13). In Aramaic, mother tongue of Jesus, no word distinguishes siblings from cousins—though Greek words for brother/sister are used here. A very early tradition says Joseph was a widower with adult children when he married Mary/Miriam who was probably a young teenage. One early tradition has Joseph betrothed to Mary age 12 or 14 as an 80-year-old. Yes, the biblical family!

Hope read the only portion in the gospels concerning Jesus childhood after infancy. Luke 2: Mary - Joseph returning to Nazareth from Jerusalem after pilgrimage. They lose track 12-year-old Jesus—takes days to notice and return to Jerusalem. They find him in the temple courts conversing with the elders there. Upon seeing him Mary calls out: "How could you do this to us? We were worried sick!" Jesus says, "I had to be in my father's house." He doesn't take on his mother's anxiety, doesn't feel responsible for it. And returns with them.

Cited to illustrate a family system approach to anxiety—which says anxiety flows between people, and the way to unplug from the anxiety of an anxious system is to self-define (as Jesus does here) and if

possible, stay connected (as Jesus does.) “I think our President spews racist views, knowing it will play well” is self-defining statement. It’s not making an argument or even asking anyone to agree. It’s a simple unveiling of how you see things—because how we see things is invisible to others unless we put words around it. Self-defining can be hard to do at first in our closest relationships. And sometimes the only thing that prevents a family or a village from turning into a mob is the willingness of dissenters to speak up and break the spell of assumed consensus.

And while these self-defining moves are an important way to unplug from the anxiety of a family system, they don’t unplug us from the sadness or the pain or the distress when our family or village harbors toxic views that lead to harmful deeds.

Misery does need company and I’ve found some company in noticing how Jesus experienced all this. Chronic alienation in our kinship circle gives us a feeling of being alone in the world, and being alone from, bereft of God. So there is a consolation in seeing how the rabbi had to deal with this. The next time we see him interacting with his family, as a mature adult this time, it’s gotten worse. Mark, chapter 3. Psychologically astute portion.

Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” [This is followed by several more verses detailing his defense against power of accusation coming at him powerful elders from Jerusalem]

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters[□] are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

At the very time he feels under threat from powerful outside forces centered in his nation’s capital, forces coming at him with false accusations, just then his family arrives, obviously having internalized this propaganda. They think he’s deceived, not in his right mind.

This time, he doesn’t go home with them. If anything, he disconnects from his family for a time and there’s no reconnection until we see Mary at the cross. But for now his family is too toxic—and he is without their support where he needs it most. He seems not to have a single family member, an aunt, an uncle, a sibling, a cousin that he can confide in, who understands.

What degree of alienation are we talking about here? Pretty bad. It’s helpful to read this episode in light of the time he read and commented on the day’s Scripture portion in his hometown synagogue, early in

his public teaching period. It ends with the villagers congealing in a great offense at him, threatening his life. Luke 4. No family member rises to his defense at this time—they were surely present.

Just as some of our families have internalized a toxic-harmful ideology and the well of family relationships seems poisoned by it. He too was caught up in cultural conflict fueled by powerful voices in the nation's capital, resonating in his village, and affecting his own family.

What does he do for support now In Mark 3, when his mother and siblings are in an opposition relation to him? He begins to regard others, safer people, as his family; turns to those gathered near him in the room where he's teaching: "Behold my mother, my brothers, my sisters, my mother" [interesting...No fathers mentioned, perhaps there were no older men in the group.] He's not just in a teaching mode. I mean that's how we hear it at our distant remove. I think he always needs the people in the room to know that he regards them, he needs them, as family now, because his own family cannot be family.

As I age, I realize how much family realigns over a lifetime. Our experience of family can seem so static—like a Michigan winter. The way it is and always will be. But over a lifetime there can epic shifts. I grew up in the same house with a mother, father, two sisters. But by age 18 my sisters were in NYC, and I was in Ann Arbor a long-distance phone call away from parents, forming a new family. In my new version of nuclear family in Ann Arbor, it's gradual expansion, but a lot of stability. When I'm asked, "Is your address still, blah, blah?" I'm like, "Yep, boring as the post office" Then kids grow up, move out, most far away, wife dies, and I'm alone in a house with a bunch of empty bedrooms. Even the Post Office not immune to change. After 2 years alone, I marry Julia, move into her house, stepdad to Oceana, entering 9th Grade. An entirely different family with their own history that I didn't share. I think it was close to the wedding, and Oceana's brother, Andrew was in town from UK. I'm backing out of the driveway and I look at the three of them: Julia, Andrew, Oceana. Family to each other. Soon to be my family. None of us biologically related. Andrew was Julia's first husband's son, from a previous marriage. Oceana adopted. But Andrews father Richard had died, and soon his mother Margaret would also. So they were it for each other: family. And I was to be part of them.

For many reasons—death, divorce, people growing up, moving away, as big social and cultural disruptions that strain our family/village relationships such as are in the middle of—for many reasons, families are disrupted, kinship ties are reconstituted, adjusted, reconfigure.

I think of how the gospel of John doesn't go into the family-disruption so much. But John, who seems emotionally tuned into to Jesus, tells of how Jesus had a close friendship with Martha, Mary, and Lazarus---closet he had to peer friends, not disciples who traveled with him. Friends with their own home that he came to for respite. They lived in Bethany, a village on the outskirts of Jerusalem. His travels there are always tense, conflict-ridden, so it was handy to have these close friends nearby. Jesus was in a non-traditional status as a single man in his 30's. His friends are also single, siblings. Together, four mature single adults in a society where marriage was more or less forced on people. To be of marriageable age and circumstance and not to marry was like not putting your hand over your heart for

the pledge of allegiance. Sociologically at least, for their time, these four were a queer family, a kinship group inhabiting a minority space in the social order.

How do we see his social situation affecting his experience of the divine? The two realms don't function independently. I first drawn to rabbi Jesus the radical revolutionary Jesus of the gospels in the early 1970's, a time of great cultural turbulence, when my family-social connections were in a turbulent transition and when my psyche needed a hero real bad.

So our spirituality is affected by our surrounding experiences and needs.

And it seems to me at this time, when family-village intimacy was disrupted, that Jesus leaned into, because he needed an intimately personal connection with the divine---he was known for regarding God as Abba, dear Father. Was it unrelated to the fact he lost his father early, or that his father was old enough to be his grandfather or great grandfather? Also, Indications that Jesus, in his spirituality, developed a close identification with Sophia, a divine feminine wisdom-presence. Every reason to think he had mystical experience of Divine Feminine in this period.

Why wouldn't his experiences of the divine be shaped by his deep human needs in a time of alienation from his family and village connections?

Heart of spirituality is fostering an inner vision, a sense of connection—through the portals of intellect, emotion, imagination, prayer, meditation, relationship, music, arts, literature, nature, silence, exercise, yoga, woodworking, gardening, farming, hunting, fishing—with divine or transcendent love. Human love is our primary portal into divine love, but human love is subject to the human condition. Alone, it can reveal and distort, and aspects of our closet family relationship can at times cloud and confuse our understanding of the divine as much as offer a window to the divine. And so the work of spirituality is to open other channels, other portals, dig other wells to the depths of divine love.

And new portals can open to us through times of turbulence and deprivation. Over quarantine I've felt a certain Wilson family-love deprivation. Missed a few planned visits since March. Saw Grace in Pittsburgh! Noticed lately, a new-for-me experience of the ancestors coming into my praying space. My circumstances allow me the luxury of taking a half hour or so before dinner prep most days, have a glass of wine, do my evening prayers...Maybe 10 minutes of headspace and then do what feels to me like slow-stupid thinking, less verbal awareness space...and sometimes I have sense of loved ones who have gone on before, Glen, Blanche, Nancy, Phyllis Tickle an old friend—sometimes figures I'm studying from Scripture...and often there's a feeling of fierce protection, consolation, sometimes wisdom comes to me. Certain disruptions or deprivations can be cracks through which Spirit seeps in.

Let's take a couple of minutes for a meditative time, if your circumstances there at home allow. Get comfortable in your chair, focus for a moment on feeling grounded to the earth. Weight of the body pressing down, the feet on the floor. A sense of being connected, held in place. There's a line in the Psalms (72) a lovely depiction of the messianic presence or to make it simpler, divine presence. "May he

come down like rain/dew falling on newly mown grass.” May she come down, or may they come down, if that works better for you. I like this image when I’m feeling my nerves jangled...like the raw edge of a newly mown blade of grass...only a bunch of blades. “May God come down like rain or dew on newly mown grass” With that image of a protective moisture, rain or dew falling on newly mown grass, suggest that you imagine a protective person with you sitting there. Is there someone you have experienced a kind of divine presence from, a reassuring presence, a protective presence, and understanding presence—a living person, or often one who is passed on: grandparent, aunt, a favorite teacher, could be a beloved pet, sometimes a bird, or a deer, an eagle, hawk, can come to represent a divine presence to...Whatever that is for you, just rest your imagination, awareness on their presence with you, for another half minute.