My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Lord of our Bodies, Hearts, Souls, and Spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, our strength and our Redeemer, Amen.

This last weekend and week has been amazing, hasn’t it? Well, the weather didn’t exactly cooperate for those of us who stayed here in the Northeast, but I’ll bet that lots of us connected with family in some fashion. We can recall in prior years when the weather was sunnier on Memorial Day weekend when we gathered at somebody’s house—whether our grown kids, or an aunt’s or parent’s house—we recall gathering with family when we get some extended weekends and time off.

Family time is special, for sure; its affection and togetherness is lovely. Healthy family systems is where we learn unconditional love. They teach us lots about navigating relationships and learning where we fit and how we express ourselves. But the object of parenting should be to raise kids who don’t just serve the family but who move beyond it.

But our pandemic family scene has magnified the family scene in some odd ways. The self-enclosed or ingrown nature of many families—where all dreams and expectations are wrapped up in family togetherness—means that one’s absence from a family activity is perceived as serious insult. We’ve been told that our kids and grand-kids have sacrificed so much that we now have to participate in literally everything they do to make up for lost time. Now that we can gather again, miss the nephew’s soccer game, skip a cousin’s birthday, and you’ve essentially broken ranks. You’ve disrespected the tightness of the family bond.

A recent Pew Research survey confirms my hunch. The number one source to which Americans look for meaning and fulfillment in their lives is the family. In fact, when it comes to those activities that provide a great deal of meaning and fulfillment, religious faith falls far behind spending time with family, being outdoors, caring for pets, and listening to music. No wonder funeral remembrances and eulogies often saturate listeners with the deceased person’s adoration of family. It’s the ideal representation we want, representing a life well-lived.

The scriptures give us no sense that the family is an end in itself. Isn’t one of the chief purposes of family to teach us to turn outward toward others? If you love only those who love you, Jesus said one time, what credit is that to you? In other words, so what! There’s nothing noble about spending all your energies of love on those closest to you or on those easiest and coziest to love.

In the Gospels, the family is always secondary to Christ’s claim on his followers. Jesus never asks us to choose him over the devil; he asks us to choose him over the family. This message is hard for many believers to swallow. What Jesus implies is that fixating on love of family will not make one a disciple. It may even get perilously in the way.

Our scripture has two separate groups of characters standing on opposite sides of a door: insiders and outsiders. Outside, along with the scribes from Jerusalem, stands Jesus’ family. The inside is where Jesus has just retired for a meal with his newly appointed disciples, ones we would expect and other riffraff who are crowding around Jesus so much that he cannot eat.

Jesus’ family has heard that he is behaving as if he were possessed, and they have come to intervene. Indeed, the scribes are claiming that Jesus casts out demons by the power of that greatest demon of all, Satan. Either uninvited or unwilling to enter, his family summons their son and brother to come out to them.

Jesus responds with a sweeping gesture that takes in all those inside seated around him: “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shouldn’t those who represent the two major protectors of social order—the family and the synagogue—be the insiders? With his simple gesture and words, Jesus turns this upside down.

Surely anyone who has parented teenagers or can recall their own teenage years can relate to the family’s feeling that their grown child is suddenly so possessed of outlandish ideas and behavior that he or she seems to have gone crazy. The ideas of the next generation so often seem to challenge the carefully constructed world the last one has created for itself. Yet how tightly we cling to that order! In an honor/shame culture, a child’s behavior—even when grown—is of great consequence. The social standing of Jesus’ family is jeopardized by his behavior. The whole family is shamed.

But Jesus is going for deep change. His exorcisms are not only for individuals but for the social institutions that helped create the diseases he is healing. The social order that the Hebrew people had known for centuries was in fact already crumbling. As the land peasant families had farmed for generations was consolidated into large estates, there was an exodus to the cities. Younger sons, in particular, were forced to leave behind the land of their ancestors for crowded and impoverished urban life. With the traditional clan network disappearing, Jesus was only pointing out the obvious: the people were indeed becoming a “house divided against itself.”

Jesus creates a new concept of family, one based not on blood but on love in action. “Woman, behold your son . . . [and] son behold your mother,” he said to his mother and to the Beloved Disciple at the Cross.

Elsewhere, he referred to those who do “the will of my Father in heaven” as those who are his “brother and sister and mother.” What’s going on in these and other utterances? Jesus is dethroning the biological family and asking us to transcend our genealogy and clan enough to become members of a larger family of faith.

This is most risky. Not only in Jesus’ time, when the clan and family were somehow still idealized, but also now, as we come out of an age of isolation, and renew the sense that family is the one enduring thing that holds meaning and all that’s reliable at the end of the day. We know deep down that we need *more*. We know deep down that we have lost *more*. We know that we have made connections that last *more*. When we place God first above our human ego needs, there is soooo much *more*, isn’t there? So why do we fear to seek the *more* that we feel? I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

Did you notice in today’s Gospel reading, that when Jesus refers to his new family, 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. But 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.

Family can be a beautiful means to even greater affections. But when it becomes an end in itself, our availability to and for others shrinks dramatically. That makes for a very small religion.

We need to re-imagine community where nurturing and egalitarian relationships are prioritized. As a church, how can we be more nurturing? How might our priorities shift in inreach, outreach, and community engagement? What if meetings were structured to create a community of brothers and sisters, mothers and nurturing fathers? How will committees work differently? Would we even have committees, or something more along the lines of work-groups that take off and do new and wondrous things for more-than-church members?

If we actually lived into Jesus’ vision of family, how would the church of today be different? We laid the groundwork in our Constitution changes last month. Now we need to re-read those commitments and start to take them seriously. Jesus has pointed the way; its up to us to follow.

Thanks be to God, Amen.