

There is truth in scripture—abundant truth that comes alive and speaks to us. The truth in scripture is handed down to us through the set of crucial stories that carry clues for discovering and living into our spiritual potential—our mythology.

But we can confuse the living truth itself with the stories that deliver it; a little like chewing on the spoon after you drink the soup. The confusion can distract us, and Mark's story about Jesus and his family is a prime opportunity.

We so earnestly want the family of our incarnate Lord to be well-adjusted and happy—the very model of perfect family relationships—but this passage has troubled Christian scholars. The translators of the King James Bible chose to remove Jesus' family from the opening scene, saying: "And when his *friends* heard of it, they went out to lay hold on him: for they said, 'He is beside himself.'" The version we heard today, the New Revised Standard Version, puts the family in a fairly good light by saying: "When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for *people* were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind'."

Now to be fair, the Greek text is tantalizingly ambiguous: "And hearing of it, the ones beside of him went out to lay hold on him, for they said he is standing outside of himself." I think "the ones beside him" were Jesus' family based on the reference to them a little later in the passage.

But then another snag arises. Some highly respected scholars suggest that Jesus really did turn his back on his own mother and siblings. I find an uncharacteristic harshness in that response, and that makes me wonder if we are trying to make Jesus so mythologically pious, so *superhumanly* devout, that he would readily abandon his immediate family as outsiders. That he would claim a new family and disown his biological family because they misunderstood him or because they were worried about his mental health.

Maybe the family was frustrated because Jesus, the first-born son, was hanging around with a questionable crowd instead of earning a living to support them. Maybe his family had expectations that instead of healing the sick and preaching that Jesus should aim higher—that he should take on a respectable political career and overthrow the Romans.

But isn't that what real families do? Not mythological families, but real ones like yours and mine. When I declared a philosophy major my first year as an undergraduate at the University of Washington, my dad was upset. "What are you going to do," he asked me, "open a philosophy store?" Two years ago, when the State University of New York published my book based on the most widely read philosopher in America, Dad was singing a very different tune!

But real families often express their concerns awkwardly, don't they? Real families hold out expectations—some fair and some unreasonable. Real families misunderstand.

When we imagine the mother and siblings in Mark's Gospel to be a real family in all their funk and glory, something interesting starts to emerge. Mark compares the family to influential religious legal scholars who also appear to misunderstand who Jesus really is: his family assumes he has lost his sanity and the religious authorities conclude that he is possessed by Satan—essentially the same diagnosis in the ancient world.

In other words, the people who presumably were in the best positions to make sense of Jesus had difficulty seeing him as who he understood himself to be. The message that Jesus embodied was too disorienting, too radical, too threatening for some, and too good to be true for others.

Well, buried in the very heart of this passage is a line that still confounds us, but for me it is the key to hearing living truth in this bewildering story. The version of the story we heard said: "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter." But the Greek is a bit more compelling: "Amen," it says. "I say to you that all will be forgiven to the sons of men, the sins and the blasphemies which they might have blasphemed." Now

there's a part of me that empathizes with translations that refer to "people" rather than "the sons of men" to make it more inclusive, because Jesus was more inclusive.

But here's the reason I prefer to let it stand. The reference to humans as "the sons of men" appears only once in Mark's Gospel. It is the plural form of the phrase that Jesus uses in all four Gospels to refer to himself—the title that Jesus claims most often in Mark's Gospel. If Jesus is the "son of man," and all the people are "the sons of men," then Jesus is naming all people as his kin. Jesus is making an identity claim as the first-born of a family that includes anyone and everyone who claims their birthright as a member of the household of God—the household that acts out God's welcome, healing, mercy and justice.

Jesus redefined the criteria for membership in this family: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and my sister and my mother." Jesus named those who sat around him as family, which means that we don't have to wait until the end of time to include or exclude ourselves. Nor do we need to abandon our loved ones in order to act as though we trusted God. In fact, we can look to God to help us nurture families and communities that bring God's household to life.

Or we can choose to turn the gift of our set of stories, our living mythology, into dead voices from the past by becoming so distracted in our search for factual certainty that we lose touch with the truth at the heart of these stories. Don't get me wrong: Scripture is essential, a true gift from God, but God's living truth speaks to us right here and now, and from a glorious future.

We can choose to make the institutions, systems and practices that keep and carry our mythology more important than the truth that they convey. Boundaries are useful to people, but God's Spirit penetrates them all.

We can prefer the traditions of our family, our clan, our nationality or our denomination over God's yearning for reconciliation, forgiveness and love. We are right to cherish our clan traditions, but God's Spirit radiates beyond them all.

We can put our trust in our political ideologies, our life philosophies or our religious standpoint more than in our trust that God will grant us fresh insights

through mutually respectful interactions with other ideologies. A point of view is essential for people, but God's Spirit transcends and includes aspects of all points of view.

We can choose to hold on to a misstep, a poor choice or a tragic action as the one thing that God cannot forgive. And that, brothers and sisters, *that* is the sin that cannot be forgiven. God will not forgive the sin for which you refuse forgiveness. We are free to choose, but remember this: "Amen, I say to you that *all* will be forgiven." Not "*might* be forgiven," but "*will* be."

The household of God is a household of welcome, healing, mercy and justice. The transcendent household of God is a family of people joined in their commitment to trust and embody God's Spirit. Our individual experiences and perspectives differ widely. Our understanding of what a family is or isn't varies. Our children's worlds are much more fluid, permeable and interconnected than the ones we grew up in. Other cultures and religions interpret the role of family differently. A storm of potential misunderstandings is constantly brewing and threatening to separate us.

Our help will not come from trying to make our stories work literally nor from trying to warp them to fit a specific worldview. Instead, our help will come from trusting the truth of Jesus enough to "stand outside ourselves," even if it appears to our loved ones that we have gone out of our minds. We may have to welcome the Holy Spirit in a sort of "holy insanity," perhaps just for a moment or two, so that we can cooperate with the movement of Spirit in action in the world.

To act as though we actually trust the truth of God's household, we will have to watch our grip on our institutions, our practices and, yes, even our grip on our mythologies. These must be held as though we were holding a live dove—not so tightly that we strangle the life out of them, yet not so loosely that we lose them entirely.

To act as though we really do trust the on-going movement of God's Holy Spirit, we must put ourselves at risk for learning from others—other cultures, other worldviews, other religions, and perhaps even others in our own families.

We can look at the people in our lives and join our voices with Christ in saying, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister.” And then, when we are out in the world, we can watch for openings to offer welcome, healing, mercy and justice to others—to act with acceptance, forgiveness or respect wherever we find ourselves. In that way, our lives become stories that carry clues for others to discover and to live into their spiritual potential—to find their place in the household of God. That’s the living and abundant truth that we can pass along.