

A New Family of Faith

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[0 : 00] I'm now going to read this morning's reading from Luke chapter 8 verses 1 to 21. Yeah, starting in chapter, no, verse 1.

So, after this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases.

Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had come out, Joanna, the wife of Chusa, the manager of Herod's household, Susanna, and many others.

These women were helping to support them out of their own means. While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path. It was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on the rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.

[1 : 06] Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

When he said this, he called out, Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. His disciples then asked him what this parable meant, and he said, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that though seeing they may not see, though hearing they may not understand.

This is the meaning of the parable. The seed is the word of God. Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.

Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature.

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering, produce a crop. No one lights a lamp and hides it in a clay jar or puts it under a bed.

[2 : 32] Instead, they put it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open.

Therefore, consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more. Whoever does not have, even what they think they have will be taken from them. Now Jesus' mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd.

Someone told him, Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you. He replied, My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice.

So we're going to be thinking this morning about Luke chapter 8. So if you have an order of service, please keep it open, or if you have a Bible with you, keep it open at that chapter.

And we're going to be thinking about the first couple of verses that we read, and then the last few verses that we read, down to verse 21. I wonder if you have ever been deeply worried about a friend or a family member, because you can see that the way that they are living is really risky, or even dangerous to themselves or maybe to others.

[3 : 49] where you can see the kind of things that they're saying and doing, and you can foresee as well what the consequences might be, or what the reactions to what they're doing might be.

And you fear for them, and your first reaction is to go to them and stop them, tell them to stop what they're doing before they hurt themselves or hurt someone else.

In our culture, we even have this as a kind of entertainment that you find in the celebrity world, in the tabloids, where we set up usually young, quite inexperienced people, and we give them lots of pressure and responsibility and publicity, and then also lots of excess as well in how they live.

And then we watch them as they struggle to maintain this and for their lives not to collapse under all of this weight. And we watch this and you're drawn in as the viewer, because you can see maybe what might be a step or two down the road.

We call it the celebrity train wreck in our culture, as you watch lives like this and try and work out whether what you think you'll see down the road really will happen and whether this life will be ruined or whether someone's going to intervene.

[4 : 59] Maybe you think back about parts of your own life like this as well, where you look back on younger days and you can see with hindsight a path that you were on, and you know by experience the consequences that it came to, and you wish, if only I could go back and tell myself, stop, look at the path that you're on.

Now this morning in Luke chapter 8, we're looking at a part of Jesus' life when his own mother and brothers were deeply worried about him because of the path they thought that he was on.

They were worried about the life that he was leading, about things he was saying and doing, and they have now come to him to try and intervene, to tell him, stop, stop doing what you're doing, Jesus, and stop saying what you're saying.

Now why would Jesus' own mother and brothers feel the need to try and intervene in his life like this? And why would they be so extremely worried about him and about his safety?

Well the reason is that the things that Jesus has been saying and doing in his, what we call his public ministry, so when he announces himself in public and starts going around preaching and teaching and performing miracles and so on, the things that he's been doing so far in that public life, public role, are all things that implies very openly that Jesus thinks that he is unique and special, in fact that he is the son of God, that he is equal in power and glory and importance to God himself, which means that Jesus thinks that he deserves the worship and the constant loyalty of those around him, all those that he comes into contact with.

[6 : 48] And his family know that to go around saying and doing things like that is to put yourself in grave danger. Now that might be a hard thing for you to grasp as a secularized Westerner maybe, because in our culture religious claims are quite easy to ignore and you can think that they're just inconsequential, that they don't matter if someone says grandiose religious things about themselves or their beliefs, then you can just shut that out and that's not necessarily a difficult thing to do and you might think that religion is quite a powerless thing.

But if you think like that, then you are in the minority in the world today. The world has never been more religious and religion continues to be the thing, the single most important thing that animates the lives of billions of people across the world.

And in Jesus' day, it was the same. I want to give you an example of this, a classic example from 2007. There was a British teacher who moved to Sudan, which is a deeply religious culture, a Muslim culture, and she moved there to teach in a school.

And she gave a teddy bear as a gift to her class and told the class, you can choose what the bear will be called. And there were a few boys in the class whose name was Muhammad and the class chose to give that name to the teddy.

And the teacher wasn't really sensitive enough to local religious sensibilities or how this act would be perceived. And she said, that's fine. This is now the name of our class, Teddy.

[8 : 21] And there was a major public uproar that spread very quickly about this teacher because her conduct was deemed to have insulted Islam and insulted local religious sensibilities and beliefs.

So the teacher was arrested and she was charged and she was convicted and sent to prison for insulting religion. And then when she was in prison, 10,000 local people took to the streets of Khartoum with swords and machetes calling for her to be executed.

So even though she was in prison, her life was still in danger and she ended up having to be sent back to the UK and the school that she taught in was shut down, again, because of safety concerns for those involved.

Now, the world that Jesus lived in was like that kind of culture in many respects. If you say things that the public thinks are blasphemous, you put your life on the line.

You put your life in danger. And you don't even have to think of somewhere like Sudan, which might seem very far away to you. Think of the appalling news from Paris very recently where a teacher in his class was deemed, again, to have insulted particular religious sensibilities and was murdered in broad daylight on the way home from teaching his class.

[9 : 40] So this is what the world is like for very many people. And it's what the world was like in Jesus' culture as well.

So what exactly was it that Jesus had done that had made his mother and his brothers so worried about him that had made them think, even to be saying the things he's saying and doing the things he's doing, he must be out of his mind.

Well, so far, Jesus has been doing things that are deeply provocative. And that's quite an understated way to put it. He has spent 40 days in the wilderness.

And if you're from that culture, the bells immediately start to ring because you know that the Israelites, after they left Egypt, spent 40 years in the wilderness, in the desert. And they faced all kinds of tests and they failed.

Whereas Jesus has spent 40 days in the wilderness, symbolically setting himself up as the new Israel. And the Israelite people, when they spent these 40 years in the wilderness, were called by God to be a light to the nations, to be the source of God's blessing to the whole world.

[10 : 52] So when Jesus does this 40 days in the wilderness, he is setting himself up as the true Israel, as the one through whom God is going to bless the whole world.

And he's saying, in effect, to those around him, I am the one person from our nation, from our people group, that the whole world needs to know about. As well as that, he's been publicly baptized by John the Baptist.

And a voice has been heard in public coming from heaven, from God himself saying, you are my son. And this is in a culture where when a father sends his son on his behalf, you have to treat the son with every bit as much respect as you would treat the father.

In fact, you see the son as the father's equal, the father's representative, the father's equal in power and glory and importance. So for Jesus to be publicly identified, as all these words are spread, the word is spreading, publicly identified by a voice from heaven as you are my son, that is saying that you have to treat Jesus just as you would treat God with all of the same respect and reverence and worship.

Jesus goes around, has been going around choosing his own disciples, walking up to people and saying, follow me, your life is about me now. And that in a culture where normally it was the other way around, if you wanted to be formed by a religious teacher, you went looking for that teacher and you chose him.

[12 : 21] He's been healing people. He's been making ceremonially impure people who couldn't go to the temple to worship. He's been declaring them pure and telling them, go and present yourself to a priest.

You are pure now. You can go and worship. He's been telling people that their sins are forgiven, that he has forgiven those sins. And that's in a culture where everyone knows only God can do that.

God is the one who is offended by sin. God is the one who forgives it. So when Jesus says, I am forgiving you, I forgive your sin. Your sin is a problem for me, but I forgive it. It could not be more controversial.

He's been telling people that he is something new and remarkable in the world. He's been saying that he is the delivery of great new wine. He's been telling people that he is a bridegroom who has arrived for his wedding.

In a culture where your week is centered on the Sabbath day, the day that you focus on God, Jesus has told people publicly by this point that he is the Lord of the Sabbath.

[13 : 23] So the day that you're meant to focus on God, that's about Jesus as well. And Jesus is the Lord of that. So it's no surprise, on the one hand, that everywhere he goes, he draws a crowd.

And there are people who follow him. There's always lots of drama around Jesus. He's this major focus of attention because of all of these things that he's saying and doing. And some of that is very appreciative.

Some of it's just confused. Some of it is curious. And some of it is just outright hostile towards Jesus. In Mark's gospel, he says that by this point, Jesus had managed to unite two groups of people against him who otherwise would not have come together.

The Pharisees, so ultra-religious Jews who didn't have much time, for example, for the Romans. And the Herodians. So these were the Jews who were happy to work with the Herodian dynasty, the kings that the Romans had appointed to rule over Israel and who were not very nice or holy people in any sense.

So the Herodians and the Pharisees both react so strongly against Jesus that they decide to plot together to have him killed. So that's the scary thing here.

[14 : 38] If you're maybe Jesus' mother or brothers, that you can see that he's making enemies everywhere he goes. And he's even uniting mutual enemies against himself.

So he doesn't have powerful allies at all. And in fact, he's creating a kind of coalition of people who want to have him killed. So if you are Jesus' family, and if you see this happening, and you become, well, you become worried about his safety.

And that is what has happened with his mother and his brothers. So what we find here is that Jesus' mother and brothers come looking for him. And they're not just worried about his safety.

They're also making conclusions about his mental health. They're saying he must be out of his mind to be saying and doing the things that he's doing. And they start telling people this as the reason for why Jesus is like Jesus.

Now we know from the Bible that in Jesus' life at this point, that he had four younger brothers and that they did not believe in him.

[15 : 42] So all of these claims he's making about himself, they don't believe it. And they thought that he was unhinged mentally. And here they come then, as we get into Luke chapter 8, looking for him to do some kind of intervention, to stop him, to put him on a different path.

And when they get to him, what they find is that he's surrounded by this crowd of people who follow him wherever he goes. And that's where we're focusing in then on what we have in Luke 8.

Luke is a details-oriented writer. And you see this in the Gospel of Luke and also in Acts. And so he gives us detail, though, on some of the people who did not want to kill Jesus.

In fact, some of the people who believed Jesus, who didn't think he was out of his mind. And he gives us a really brief portrait of three women who think that Jesus was exactly who he said he was and who treat him as God and who rebuild their lives around him, whose lives now exist to follow him.

So I want us to look at those three women this morning. And we're going to do that. We've got two main points in the rest of the talk. And the first is this, that Jesus is creating a new kind of family.

[16 : 53] And that's a family of faith. And that's a family of faith where he is at the centre. So Jesus is creating a new kind of family, point one. The second point is that being part of that family with Jesus, his family of faith, is much more important than being part of his biological family.

I'm going to explain what I mean by that as we get a little bit further on. But the first point is that Jesus is creating a new kind of family. Now when Jesus' biological family sets off to track him down, Jesus is at this point, he has formed a community around himself.

So he has these 12 disciples and there are also some women who've become part of this community around him. Luke tells us that he had healed them of illnesses and he'd also set them free from evil spirits that were tormenting them.

And we have the names of three of these women. There was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, the wife of Chusa, and there was Susanna. Now Mary Magdalene features quite a lot in the Bible, but we don't actually know all that much about the specifics of her life other than that her life was profoundly changed by Jesus and that then she was one of Jesus' most devoted followers.

There's a whole story and tradition that's been built up around Mary Magdalene over the last 2,000 years that she was a prostitute, for example, who became one of Jesus' followers.

[18 : 25] But we don't know that for sure at all from the Bible. If you're one of the millions of people who has had the misfortune of reading or watching the Da Vinci Code, you'll have been given a fictional Mary Magdalene there as well.

But the reality is that we just don't know that much about the specifics of her life from the Bible. And even Luke, who's very details-oriented, doesn't delve into the details of her story too much.

But what he does tell us is that seven demons have been cast out of her. Now, we shouldn't overlook how important this detail is from Luke with the seven details, the seven demons that have been cast out.

Her life had been a complete ruin when Jesus found her. A complete mess. So if you think of someone whose life is in a downward spiral, there has to come a point where you hit rock bottom and where the downward spiral reaches its end.

And that is, it looks like, where Mary Magdalene's life was. So in the Bible, numbers really matter a lot. They have a lot of symbolic value. And seven is a number of completion.

[19 : 36] It's a number of something being full, something being finished, so you think of the seven or the six days of creation and God rests on the seventh day. Think of the number seven crops up a lot in the Bible and it represents that something has reached its goal.

It's been completed. And here it looks like Mary Magdalene's life, the evil forces that conspire to ruin her and to really make her a downtrodden person, to crush her, to ruin any prospect of flourishing as someone who's made in God's image.

those processes and forces have reached their goal. And when Jesus finds her and transforms her, she's someone whose life is a complete ruin.

Probably someone whose life has been on the receiving end of a lot of harshness from the world. Probably someone who's been broken by this chaotic fallen world in a passive way.

Someone who's been beaten down and oppressed. So Mary Magdalene probably was not what you could call a high status person in her world, in her culture.

[20 : 44] Probably not a wealthy person. As far as we know from the Bible, she wasn't married and an unmarried woman in that context also usually didn't have much social power.

So that's Mary Magdalene and she's one of these three women who are part of this new family of faith that Jesus is creating. Then there's Susanna and we know very little about her other than that from here that she had money and that she was able to give it out on her own.

Now that she had some degree of wealth and financial independence is probably a significant detail from Luke. Luke doesn't mention a husband in the way that he does for Joanna here which might mean that she is a widow for example who has inherited her husband's wealth and she's got some independence for how she then decides to use it.

And then we have Joanna and we have the most detail about her and the kind of details that Luke gives. If you'd read this if you were from that world you would get immediately the picture that he builds up with a very small number of words.

So she is a fascinating person in Jesus' inner circle. She was married to a man named Chusa and he was King Herod Antipas' finance minister in effect.

[21 : 58] Her husband was in charge of the king's revenues and profits and taxes. Now Chusa and his wife Joanna were certainly and we know lots about this from historical work on this period they were certainly wealthy people they were landowners and at that point in Israel a very small part of the population owned almost all of the land and most people were actually really poor so if you owned the land you had first access to the food that it grew and so on so you know you wouldn't go hungry ever and you lived in a very different world to most people who were peasants in effect and who were really poor.

So the king and his court and Joanna and her husband were part of the king's court they lived a really privileged existence. Now they were part of King Herod Antipas' court as I said and he was a brutal king in many ways.

His father King Herod the Great was probably even worse a truly brutal king and Herod Antipas his son was also capable of a lot of violence and brutality himself.

He'd taken the throne after his father died in a real struggle with his brother and then he'd become king so there's this fight for domination at the beginning and then he's the guy who beheads John the Baptist for example.

The Herod family they weren't Jews they were foreigners that the Romans had set up as the Roman loyal family to rule over the Jews on their behalf and to funnel money towards Rome.

[23 : 38] So if you're a member of the court of King Herod Antipas you truly are part of the elite in Jesus' day. you move in a completely different world to the peasants around you.

The access to money and influence and food and all kinds of opulence that you have is completely different to the vast majority of the population.

So you have this direct access to power and influence but you also are in this world that you move in you also see as well as some of the most unimaginable wealth and opulence you see some of the most horrendous brutality and in fact your wealth is all generated by the appalling way that the royal family treats the people around them the peasants around them.

So that's the world that Joanna comes from and it couldn't really be a starker contrast probably to the world that Mary Magdalene came from and the surprise here that Luke gives us is that in Jesus' new family of faith these two women associate with each other.

Now Israelite culture at that point was very stratified lots of layers of people and well the two main layers are this elite at the very top and then a pretty huge group of poor peasants and then a tiny tiny group between them.

[25 : 03] And so it had this elite and it had a peasant class and Johanna was elite Mary Magdalene was certainly not and if you look at documents from that time really the only way that you would expect to see an elite person's name mentioned in the same breath as a peasant's name like this on first name terms would be if the peasant was that elite person's slave and that's why their names should be mentioned right next to each other in the same line but that's not the case here and that's a truly remarkable thing and if you read it at the time it would really shock you to see the finance minister's wife and Mary Magdalene and their names are mentioned as equals as sisters in effect as part of this same family.

So something astounding has happened to Mary Magdalene and Johanna that has made them equals and also that's made them look at each other in a completely new way. They've experienced adoption into a new family and that shared experience of adoption is significant on so many levels and I want to speak briefly about one of those levels which is that from the details that we have to go on here Mary Magdalene as I said has probably spent her life on the receiving end of a lot of injustice in the world.

Someone whose life had been overtaken and crushed and oppressed and Johanna was the opposite an elite person whose wealth had come about through the oppression of others and Herod's court was not a nice place to be and it wasn't a place that celebrated kindness to the poor or the weak or anything like that.

So Johanna was on the other side of the tracks to Mary Magdalene more of an oppressor than an oppressed person but the Christian gospel Jesus' message manages to reach them both and addresses them both in distinctive ways and actually manages to forge a new identity for each of them a new community a new relationship to each other and in that regard the Christian message addresses the biggest concerns of our day as well which are so highly aware of questions of injustice and oppression and that feel so much anger about those issues but is also so painfully divided on them and really struggles to find a way to resolve those questions and as the secular culture around us tries to resolve all of those questions and tensions what we see in Luke 8 is that Jesus throws down the gauntlet to our culture and says in effect I brought Mary Magdalene and Johanna the wife of Chusa together into a new kingdom into a new family into a new community

I made them sisters I gave their lives a new value a new purpose a new identity so if you reject this message tell me how you are going to do this better what's your solution to this problem of the fact that the world is full of sin working itself out in different ways for oppressors and the oppressed people who really further sin actively and people who are crushed by it more passively now the point of why Luke gives us these details is to set out extremes what kind of a person can have a place in the family that Jesus is building are you like Mary is your life a wreck are you crushed by your circumstances or are you like Johanna materially maybe you've got more than you could ever need and you've experienced success and influence and power but you've also realized that it's not the life that you want maybe you see the cost that other people pay for the life that you have maybe you want to be set free from that life as well and both Mary and Joanna found this and they were changed in a lasting way these are two women who are also witnesses to the resurrection so it's not just a phase or a fad that they go through and Luke's point in sharing these extremes is and their details and their names is to say that whichever extreme you are at there is a place for you in this new family of faith that Jesus is making and in fact if you're just someone whose life is much more normal and not extreme then obviously there's a place for you as well now

[29 : 21] I want to finish really briefly by talking about the second point which is that being adopted into Jesus' family of faith matters much more than being part of his biological family to be a sibling of someone you know a really great person in history is probably a really amazing thing and a fascinating thing to get to grow up alongside someone who then goes on to be remembered forever and who does all kinds of remarkable things I remember the moment that one of my own children realised for the first time that in the bible it says Jesus had siblings had these younger brothers and my child said that's amazing wow imagine being Jesus being Jesus' sibling being Jesus' brother and how incredible a thing that would be to have grown up in the same family as Jesus and it would have been a remarkable unparalleled privilege to grow up with a sibling who was fully God and fully human and who showed you every day in your home what it looked like to live truly as the image of God in this world to live a life that it was sinless but what Jesus says here is that when his own family come thinking that his life is a train wreck that's unfolding what Jesus tells them is that to be adopted into his family of faith like Mary Magdalene or Susanna or Joanna is infinitely better and far more important

I think what he said to them when they came to him must have been so shocking at the end of our reading here my mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and who do it in other words my real siblings are not Joseph and James and Joses and Simon my real siblings are Joanna Susanna Mary Magdalene if you're a Christian if you hear the word of God and do it in Jesus' own way of putting it here your name also belongs on that list even if at this point in his life Jesus' own younger brothers their names don't belong on this list and that's quite a claim for you to consider it's another remarkably powerful and provocative direct thing that Jesus says about his significance in the world and it's Jesus' mother and brothers when they came to him thought that they were that they were watching a train wreck that was happening in slow motion all they could see was

Jesus making enemies left, right and centre and what they couldn't see at this point was actually that far more importantly Jesus was making friends Jesus was adopting siblings without realising it what they were watching wasn't a train wreck it was actually the recreation of a broken disordered world they were watching a reordering of everything that's broken by sin in this world and everything that's shattered or in Jesus' own language they were watching a mother hen gathering her chicks under her wings they were watching adoption processes happening the real train wreck in this passage is his mother and his brothers coming trying to stop him but amazingly that train wreck is also averted if you read through Luke's gospel as they eventually come to believe in him now the question that then I want to finish with that Luke poses to you reader is this who are you in this story at this point are you Jesus' mother and brothers thinking this man is out of his mind and you're coming to tell him to stop that the world does not need you saying all these things about yourself and I don't need it or are you

Joanna are you Susanna are you Mary Magdalene believing him reordering your life around him and wanting to be where he is and to be part of everything that he is making new I'll pray that briefly our Lord God our Father we thank you for sending your son Jesus into our world we thank you for all that he is making new and we thank you for the family of faith that he is building around himself still in our world help us as we hear your word to respond to it to think through who we are in this passage and help us we pray give us faith help us in our unbelief to believe and to be like Joanna and Susanna and Mary Magdalene help us to see the hope and the healing that the gospel brings into our world we pray Amen