The afternoon heat was unbearable. I kept trying to find patches of shade as I walked across Duke’s campus, but it wasn’t doing any good. I had purposefully picked out my clothes that morning: khaki pants, a long sleeved button-up shirt and a bowtie, and now I regretted it. As streams of students slithered past me, I quickly glanced at my watch again and again hoping that something was wrong with the ticking arms; it was as if they were looking back up at me perfectly content to say with every tick: you – are – late. Taking a moment to regain my bearings, I promptly increased my pace towards the edge of campus. As the number of students decreased, the number of men and women in white coats with stethoscopes around their shoulders took their place. Finally my feet bridged the dividing line between the university and the hospital, and I took a moment to inspect myself. My mouth was parched from panting across campus, my bowtie had become loose and looked pathetic dangling from my collar, and my shirt had turned into a darker shade of blue thanks to my perspiration.

I felt calmer knowing that I had finally arrived at the hospital, but when I took the damp map out of my pocket, I knew my adventure was far from over. The building where I needed to be was sidewalks, stairways, and parking lots away from my present location. As I unnecessarily folded the map back into my pocket, I departed once again towards inevitability.

Fifteen minutes later, after going into the wrong building and finally asking a security guard, I found myself sitting in the office of the Clergy Supervisor of Duke University Hospital, who was late. Immediately upon entering the room I felt uncomfortable. The man had accolades and degrees hung on every available surface, he had manifold worn books perfectly placed behind his desk, and his air-conditioning was on full blast. I tried to make myself comfortable in one of his chairs, but the brisk air coming from the window unit continued to build the tension inside, and outside, of my body. During the moments of waiting I pulled out my phone and checked my emails, I glanced at the man’s books with curiosity, I flipped through my Bible to find
comforting passages, and I tried to pray my way out of my own anxiety until he entered the room. It was about to start, my interview for a position at Duke University hospital as one of their on-call chaplains for two semesters, a necessity for completing ordinations requirements for the United Methodist Church.

“Tell me a little about yourself,” he said after sitting down across from me. “Tell me about why you think God has called you to be a minister.” Immediately I relaxed. You see, I’ve answered that question hundreds of times. But as the interview moved on from my own narrative, it was clear that this wasn’t going to be easy. “Tell me more about your father, what does he do for a living, is he proud of you, would you say you’re an embarrassment to him, if I asked him would he tell me that he loves you, do you love him?” “And what about your mother, does she have confidence in you or is she ashamed of your calling?”

The pointed questions were relentless, and after an hour and a half I had had just about enough. Finally he looked up at me, putting down his list of questions and taking off his glasses he said, “Taylor I only have one more question to ask you, this one is a situational. Two weeks ago we had a beautiful young couple come to the hospital. I remember seeing them both smile as they came in, this was the day they had been waiting for, the birth of their first child. A few hours later after a successful delivery the couple were now parents to a beautiful baby girl, but something was wrong, something had happened to her shortly after her birth and within ten minutes she was dead. The young woman was in shock, sporadically calling out for help, and the young man sat weeping in the corner. The nurse, who was with the couple throughout the entire process, called the on-call clergy and informed him that he needed to come down to baptize the dead baby girl. Taylor, what would you do?”

I imagine that when the crowds had gathered around Jesus that morning, they must have felt similarly uncomfortable. They no doubt had been following Jesus around Galilee: sweating from the heavy heat, and anxious about what this man had to say. After what had to have been a prolonged session inside of the house, someone interrupted Jesus’ teaching to inform him that his family was outside beckoning for him. Mark’s gospel also tells us that his family was searching after Jesus because they thought he had gone out of his mind with all of his developing popularity and proclamations about the kingdom of God. So after having already healed people and developing a considerable following, his family has come to call upon him, and yet he turns to the crowd with a question, “Who are my mother and my brothers?”

The answer, to me, seems pretty obvious, right? “Um, Jesus your mother is the one who brought you into the world, I believe her name is Mary, and your brothers are the others she brought into the world.” Yet, the crowd remained silent; they sat possibly perplexed by the ridiculousness of such a simple question. Without receiving a response Jesus looks out at the crowd sitting around him and declares, “All of you, here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

When I read this story in Mark’s gospel, I immediately think about Mary the mother of Jesus. How must she have felt to learn about Jesus’ declaration? The woman who brought him into the world, raised him, hid him from Herod’s destruction, went back for him at the Temple when he was only a boy, had now been passed over for the crowds. However, I think this story is not
about a rejection of his biological family, but a redefining of what it means to be family in the kingdom of God. Jesus looks out at the crowd because everything is going to be different. Familial ties will no longer be written by blood or tradition, but by doing the will of God.

Let us flip in our Bible to Exodus 20:12: “Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you.” And what about Colossians 3.20: “Children obey your parents in everything, for this is your acceptable duty in the Lord.” These proclamations of scripture hold up in Jesus’ new reality, only we must redefine what it means to be mother, father, sister, and brother. Jesus looks out at the crowd to help reorient their connections with one another. My mother and sisters and brothers are those who do the will of God.

“What would you do?” the interviewer asked me. “What would you do about baptizing the dead baby girl?” I remember looking down at my hands in my lap and realizing that I had no idea how to answer the man’s question. But I took a deep breath and closed my eyes for a few seconds and then I opened my mouth to respond:

I would begin by walking down the hallway to the room where the family was waiting. While walking, I’m sure that I would begin thinking to myself, “Am I even allowed to do this? I’m not even ordained yet, so I’m pretty sure that I shouldn’t be baptizing anyone. And what about the fact that the baby has passed away, are we allowed to baptize those who have already died?” I know that the theological conundrums would weigh heavily in my thoughts. I would recall passages from great theologians, and pin them against the Word of God in scripture, over and over until I would finally stop. I would take a breath and I would realize that this has nothing to do with me. God is going to do whatever God wants with the baby regardless of me placing water on her head or not. If God chooses me to be a vessel of God’s grace, that pales in comparison to God’s power to act on behalf of that infant. God’s will for that child has already been enacted, and she is now being cradled in the arms of her heavenly father. My responsibility is no longer to that child, but to the parents.

So I would walk into the room and I would embrace the couple. I would wrap my arms around them and let them weep into my shoulders. I would let them lament the loss of their child, and I would mourn with them. And when the time became appropriate, I would look them in the eyes and explain what I am about to do. I would tell them that baptism is a visible sign of an invisible grace. When I place water on the baby’s head she would be baptized into the body of Christ, becoming a child of God. By participating in this sacrament it is not only for your daughter, but also for both of you as parents. From now on when you gather at your church you must realize that all the children present are as much your children as they are to their biological parents. That you are to be paternal and maternal to each of them, as you would have been to this baby girl. Baptism is our way of redefining what it means to be family. Baptism means we are all made new.
Then I would take the child into my arms, and cupping water in my hands I would baptize her in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. That is what I would do.

My interviewer nodded and thanked me for my answer and I asked if it would be okay for me to ask a question. I wanted to know what the on-call clergyperson did that night when this actually took place. The interviewer sighed and his gaze fell to the floor before he responded by saying, “The young man walked into the room, looked at the baby and the parents and said, ‘My religious convictions will not allow me to baptize babies,’ and he walked out of the room.”

Now I am not standing here this morning to debate the efficacy of infant vs. adult baptism or full immersion vs. sprinkling, but what I am here talking about is how we are supposed to remember that baby girl. How we are supposed to relate to one another. I think what took place that morning in Galilee when Jesus addressed the crowds would have been important for the young couple to hear. Jesus changed everything, he helped turn the world upside down, he advocated for a provided a new reality by which we are truly connected as family through Christ.

Last week when Chad preached, I loved his message. When he talked about how busy we have all become and as parents we are responsible for relational connections, I thought it was remarkably appropriate. However, I do not have any kids, and a lot of what he talked about felt like it did not have any bearing on my life. And then I started to wonder about the other people at the service. What about those of us who do not have a family, what about those of us who are unable to having children, what about those of us who have lost their children? That’s when I started to think about Jesus addressing the crowd about what it means to be family in the Kingdom of God, and I realized how important Chad’s message was last week. We do need to relearn how to relate with our families, but our family is no longer defined by biology. Families who put others first are the ones who are taking part in the kingdom of God. They are the ones who realize that the church has become the new family.

We should make ourselves vulnerable enough to one another that we can treat everyone as our brother, sister, mother or father. Think about what the church could be like if we stopped acting as if the rows of chairs were dividers, but rather branches of the great family tree that is the body of Christ.

In a few moments Chad will be inviting all of us forward to receive Communion. I can think of no better response to the story of Jesus’ redefinition of family than by coming to the communal table and receiving the bread and juice as the family of Jesus Christ. There is one table, there is one cup, there is one loaf, there is one body, and there is one family. As you walk up this morning, I want you to take the time to look around at everyone that walks up with you. These people are no longer your neighbors or your friends, they are not your enemies or your competitors, but rather they are your brothers, sisters, sons, daughters, mothers and fathers.

It is my hope and prayer that this church is the place where that family from the hospital could come home to. Where they could walk in on a Sunday morning and see their father and mothers walking to their seats hand in hand, where they could hug and speak with their brothers and sisters in fellowships, and where they could see all of their children playing gleefully.
Jesus asks, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” We are.

I offer this in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.