I’ve attended a lot of wedding receptions over the years, and I’ve observed that they fall into three categories:

- There are simple wedding receptions;
- There are elaborate wedding receptions;
- And then there are Long Island wedding receptions.

Wedding receptions on Long Island go far beyond being merely elaborate; they can be so extravagant that the phrase “over the top” doesn’t even begin to describe the ostentatiousness of a typical reception. I’ll never forget my first experience with one of these affairs shortly after I had moved to Rockville Centre: when we arrived at the reception hall, we were escorted into a room that was filled with tables overflowing with an enormous variety of sumptuous foods; there were even stations where all sorts of hot foods were being served. Of course, there was also an open bar, as well as waiters who brought more food to each table. As I feasted on all of these wonderful dishes, I remarked to a person at my table that this was a wonderful reception; it was then that I learned that this wasn’t the reception but merely the cocktail hour, and soon we were escorted into another room where a full-course meal was served. As if that wasn’t enough, the staff reset the room where the cocktail hour was held, so that after dinner there as a similar array of desserts – for anyone who had any room left for any more food! I would soon learn that this was typical of receptions on Long Island, and I knew I had to pace myself if I didn’t want to gain too much weight in the course of the evening.

Another unique aspect of wedding receptions on Long Island is that several of the venues are so large that they can accommodate more than one reception at the same time. Places such as Jericho Manor and Crest Hollow Country Club often have three or four receptions at the same time, which can be very confusing if you are not familiar with their buildings. This happened to me on one occasion when I excused myself to use the washroom, which was quite a walk from our reception room. When I sought to return, I took a wrong turn and found myself in a room that looked very similar to the one I had just left – only I didn’t recognize any of the people. After looking around, I realized that I was in the wrong reception; the food and décor were similar, but this wasn’t the reception for the family that had invited me, and it wasn’t the place that I belonged.

Belonging at a family gathering – be it a simple Sunday dinner or an extravagant Long Island wedding reception – isn’t something that is available to everyone. Families by their very definition are exclusive; there are only a few ways that a person can become a part of a family. You are either born into a family, or are adopted as a family member, or marry into your spouse’s family. Even if you are a guest at a family event, there is a very clear distinction between being a part of the family and being there merely as a guest. Families are not open to everyone; they are limited to those with whom we are related, and place obligations and responsibilities upon us that no other group in society can do. Our family relationships are what entitle us to a place within family gatherings as they also define who we are and continue to influence the manner in which we live even when we become adult and move out of our family homes.

“The way we see ourselves, others, and the world is shaped in the setting of our family of origin. The views we develop there stay with us throughout life.” – Ronald W. Richardson.

Even though the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus’ family relationships were unique, that he was “fully God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the virgin Mary” (Small
Catechism), he grew up in a family to which we he belonged and to whom he had responsibilities. Jesus’ family relationships appear in various places in the Gospels, including today’s lesson from Mark in which Jesus returns to Capernaum, the city to which he had some connections. As would often happen when Jesus entered a town or city, “the crowd came together, so that they could not even eat” (3:20); Jesus and his disciples are essentially blockaded in this house. At the same time, members of his family are in the city, and when they hear what is happening “they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” (3:21). As a member of their family, these relatives believe that they have the authority to restrain his ministry, possibly being motivated by a desire to save Jesus from his enemies among the scribes from Jerusalem who are accusing Jesus of being demon possessed: “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” (3:22). Since persons charged with doing magic could either be banished or executed, we can understand why his family members wanted to intercede on his behalf and restrain him before he got himself into a position from which there was no escape.

But Jesus ignores the concerns of his family members (he will address them directly in a few moments) and instead responds to the scribes’ accusations by speaking in “parables” (parabolais), metaphorical speeches used to illustrate a point. As a rhetorical device, Jesus’ proverbial sayings turn the tables against an opponent by showing that any intelligent person would recognize the absurdity of these opponents’ views; common wisdom will condemn their malicious arguments. In this case, the opponents have charged that Jesus’ ability to cast out demons (which he demonstrated on a previous visit to Capernaum, in which “Jesus rebuked [an unclean spirit], saying, ‘Be silent, and come out of him!’ And the unclean spirit, convulsing and crying out with a loud voice, came out of him.” – 1:25-26) was a sign that he was possessed by “Beelzebul,” another name for Satan. Jesus responds to this charge by highlighting the impossibility that Satan could cast himself out, just as divided kingdoms and households cannot stand:

- “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.” – 3:23-26.

If Jesus was truly possessed by the Evil One, a sign of this would be that he would doing the will of Satan – not trying to destroy him.

Not only do Jesus’ actions prove that he is not under the influence of Satan; he uses the image of a strong man to show that he is stronger than Satan and is able to bind the Evil One and raid his kingdom: “But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.” (3:27). Far from being under the control of Beelzebul, it is Jesus who will be the one to bind the enemy of God’s people; when the Seventy who Jesus sent out as labourers of his harvest return and report that “Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!” Jesus in turn reports that “I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning.” (Luke 10:17-18). It is Jesus who is our Saviour from all forces that would seek to destroy us, including “sin, death, and the power of the devil” (Small Catechism).

After proving that their claims that “he has an unclean spirit” are absurd, Jesus turns the tables on his opponents and charges them with being blasphemous themselves, because they have treated the Spirit of God as a satanic force: “Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin” (3:28-29). The “unforgivable sin” is the utter rebellion against God that denies God as the doer of his own acts; “what is at stake is the truth about the saving power of God at work in the ministry of Jesus.” (Pheme Perkins). This sin is “unforgivable” because it denies that he Holy Spirit is the means through which we have access to the forgiveness and renewal that is ours in Jesus Christ. If one denies the source of forgiveness, forgiveness is not available to them.
At this point in the story, Jesus’ family reappears: “Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him.” (3:31). The identity of Jesus’ “brothers” has been the source of some controversy over the years; for Christians who believe that Mary is the ever-virgin Mother of God (semper virgo) they would not be biological brothers but brothers in faith. For those who have no problem believing that Jesus was born of a virgin who later had children in the usual manner, they would be blood relatives. Whatever the case, these are people with whom Jesus shares the exclusive bond that ties families together; they call to him in the context of such a relationship. Some have noted that the fact that his mother and brothers must call Jesus from outside indicates that Jesus’ family are not his disciples (even though many believe that Mary’s obedient response to the angel Gabriel’s announcement of the birth of Jesus – “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word” [Luke 1:38] makes Jesus the first of her son’s disciples); on the other hand, they may be outside merely because they couldn’t get through the large crowd that was hemming in Jesus and his followers. But when he is informed that “your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you,” Jesus again responds as he did in his encounter with the scribes, with a question: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Looking at those who were sitting in his midst, Jesus offers a new definition of family: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” (3:35). While biological families are by definition exclusive, limited to those who are related by birth or other particular means, the family that Jesus gathers to himself will be inclusive of all; “Jesus shows that those who refer to his family’s presence that familial authority cannot be set above doing the will of God.” (Perkins).

Jesus had been born into an exclusive family within a nation that was itself exclusive, set apart as a “chosen people” to fulfill God’s will. But now that exclusivity is giving way to a new radical inclusiveness that would perplex even Jesus’ closest followers. When his disciples encouraged Jesus to send the throngs who had come out to hear his preaching away to find food, Jesus responds by not only encouraging them to stay but by instructing the disciples, “you give them something to eat,” (Mark 6:37), having them view the 5,000 who Jesus would soon feed not as strangers but as persons worthy to share the family table with them. When these disciples rebuked families who “bringing little children to him in order that he might touch them,” Jesus responds indignantly that they must “let the little children come to me; do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs.” (Mark 10:13-14). When Jesus’ opponents grumbled because he shared his tables with those who were considered undesirable – “this fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them” (Luke 15:2), Jesus again responds with three parables about the God who seeks out all who are lost, proclaiming that “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” (Luke 15:7).

In the earliest acts of the apostles, the radicalness of Jesus’ final words to them, that “you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8) soon becomes clear. For Philip, it was when the Lord instructs him to approach an Ethiopian eunuch, a man whose physical condition had excluded him from full access to the Lord; through their conversation, this former outcast is baptized and is now fully included among the people of God. For Saul of Tarsus, his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus transforms this former enemy of the early church, the one who wanted to preserve the exclusiveness of his tradition, into the one who will be “an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel” (Acts 9:15). For Peter, his reluctant acceptance of an invitation into the home of the Roman centurion Cornelius leads him to a new understanding of the wideness of God’s mercy and the radical inclusivity of the Church of Jesus Christ: “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him.” (Acts 10:34-35). Jesus’ family, those who are his beloved disciples, are not restricted to any one particular group; unlike our biological families, the family of God is not by definition exclusive but at its heart inclusive of all God’s beloved children.

“[Jesus] opens up the tent and allows everyone who wants to enter the chance to enter. Who is his family? Those who do the will of God. When you do the will of God you get the chance to be
his brother, his sister ... even his mother! Jesus' family is an open family. The door to the family homestead is wide-open.” – Rick Morley.

As we celebrate Holy Baptism this morning, we are reminded that it is through this sacrament that we are reborn children of God and are incorporated into God’s family: “by water and the Holy Spirit we are reborn children of God and made members of the church, the body of Christ.” (ELW Holy Baptism). In Baptism, God claims us as his beloved sons and daughters; it is the means through which we are adopted into our Lord’s holy family and are now related to each other as sisters and brothers in Christ. As Paul teaches us in Romans, we are “children of God, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ” (Romans 8:16-17); through our baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection, he has given us “a new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you” (1 Peter 1:3-4). In God’s family, there is no exclusivity; all who desire to love and serve the Lord are invited to share in all the blessings that God freely bestows on all of God’s beloved children.

· “By ceasing to make our individual differences a basis of competition and by recognizing these differences as potential contributions to a rich life together, we begin to hear the call to community. In and through Christ, people of different ages and lifestyles, from different races and classes, with different languages and educations, can join together and witness to God’s compassionate presence in the world... When we form a Christian community, we come together not because of similar experiences, knowledge, problems, color, or sex, but because we have been called together by the same Lord. Only God enables us to cross the many bridges that separate us; only God allows us to recognize each other as members of the same human family; and only God frees us to pay careful attention to each other. This is why those who are gathered together in community are witnesses to the compassionate Lord. By the way they are able to carry each other’s burdens and share each other’s joys, they testify to God’s presence in our world.” – Henri Nouwen.

I finally found my way back to the reception at Crest Hollow where I belonged, because I didn’t have any right to be included in that other family’s wedding celebration. But in God’s family, it doesn’t matter what gather I find myself in, because wherever God’s people are gathered I should be welcomed and included; because the Church is the family of God, and we are here because God has chosen us through baptism as his beloved sons and daughters. There is always a welcome and place at the table in this place, because this is the gathering of the family of God – and all are welcome! Amen.