

St. Mark's Episcopal Church
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Sunday June 10, 2018 Proper 5B
Text: Mark 3: 20-35
Preacher: Christopher McLaren
Theme: Jesus' New Family

Jesus is at home. But this is not "home sweet home"; this is home packed to the gills with people who are eager to hear Jesus. They are so eager that they push into Jesus' home, fill up the space, and make it impossible for Jesus and his disciples to eat.

There are others in the crowd who are having a very different reaction to Jesus; they are repelled by him. For them, Jesus is a deranged trouble-maker; he has contradicted the mores of their society, offended people in power and challenged the religious authorities, and therefore he is "out of his mind." Of course, the mind he is out of is the conventional societal mind that accepts without questioning the present social arrangements and their accompanying theological justifications. Of course they are right. Jesus is anything but conventional. He's been healing lepers, making disciples of tax collectors, violating the Sabbath and more.

Jesus' family is so concerned they attempt to intervene to bring Jesus back to a place of safety. Really, they are doing some damage control, trying to keep Jesus from saying and doing things that might get him into deeper trouble.

Jesus has other serious problems in this story. Not only does his family think he's losing it, but the religious authorities arrive from Jerusalem with strong accusations, attempting to discredit him. "He has Beelzebul and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." Their contention is that Jesus' ability to cast out demons is due to the fact that the prince of demons inhabits him. To get our arms around this part of the story we have to understand that what creeps the religious leaders out the most about Jesus is his blatant lack of regard for purity. He simply will not stay clean. By their rules, contact with demons makes one unclean, so demons should be avoided. Of course, demons are not disembodied; they inhabit people, so one must avoid all people who manifest signs that they are in contact with unclean spirits. Therefore, there are people who must be ostracized and shunned.

Jesus does not see things this way. He doesn't leave people who display signs of sickness or possession alone to be harassed and become more ill or disordered. Instead Jesus engages with demons. He does not walk around them or avoid them. For the scribes this simply means that Jesus is mad, that he is unclean, contaminated and right out. Jesus cannot be a holy man, an enlightened rabbi, or a prophet of God, because he is contaminated and unclean. Casting out demons is not a sign of holiness, rather it demonstrates that he is friendly with demons and can order them around as one of their superiors.

Jesus is not amused. He not only engages demons and forces of darkness, he engages fuzzy-thinking scribes as well. He doesn't avoid his detractors, but he invites them to come near, into the house. In the house, Jesus answers the scribal accusations with his own parable, thus undercutting their claims and calling into question their logic. It is a very simple argument: "A house divided against itself cannot stand." The simple truth, says Jesus, is that Satan is in the business of ruining people, and he does not easily give up this ground. The enemy is not known for self-defeating behavior. The power of Jesus is not that of the enemy but from another more powerful source. It is a winning but unsettling argument. Jesus is not scared of powers and principalities, the rulers of darkness, because he is more powerful than the enemy. Jesus is in the business of plundering Satan's house. Jesus' theology turns the scribal theology on its head. The scribal theology is so frightened of demons and evil that it abandons people. But Jesus' theology is powerful and focused on liberating people. Jesus is the one who is known in the releasing of captives, the healer and restorer. Jesus works by the power of the Holy Spirit bringing new life to hurting people. This is a sign of the kingdom.

At this point in the story Jesus' family finally arrives. They are not really listening to Jesus; their familiarity has blinded them to his work. They only want to draw him away and back to themselves and back to their ordinary way of thinking and acting. But things have gone too far already. Jesus cannot turn back.

The next moment is stunning. Jesus looks around the room at those near to him, those eating up his words, being nourished by his teaching and healing, by his way of life, and he begins a new family. Jesus declares that his family is not based on kin, but rather his family is recognized in their doing of the will of God. The new family created by Jesus is marked by their cooperation with the will of God.

What does it mean to be part of this new family? I want you to put yourself in the crowded house with Jesus. Can you see the fierce eyes of Jesus gazing around the room, silencing the gathering, asking who is my mother and brothers and sisters? When you hear this question you know that there is the stirring of a new community. Who comprises this community? Certainly it includes those who are gathered in the house of Jesus, those we see face to face shuffling toward the altar of God, those whom you love and sacrifice for, those who love you and seek your growth and good. But this new family is more than that, isn't it? It includes others whose story of following Jesus you have heard and admired, but it also includes others whom you've never heard of and perhaps never will but who also were drawn into the life-giving way of Jesus. The truth is that the new family that Jesus makes includes everyone who does the will of God. It includes a vast number of people whom no one can number, extending across time and space, to the visible and the invisible people of God, who in their life and energy joined the purposes of God with their very being.

What animates this vast group of mothers and brothers and sisters? It is the Spirit of God at work within them. In the house of Jesus what is revealed is the Holy Spirit,

the liberating presence of God to all the peoples of the earth. The Holy Spirit is at work alleviating, accompanying, and transforming physical and social suffering.

Hear the words of Hildegard of Bingen as she describes the work of the Holy Spirit:

Holy Spirit,
giving life to all life,
moving all creatures,
root of all things,
washing them clean,
wiping out their mistakes,
healing their wounds,
you are our true life,
luminous, wonderful,
awakening the heart
from its ancient sleep.

Hildegard of Bingen in *The Enlightened Heart: An Anthology of Sacred Poetry*, ed. Stephen Mitchell [New York: Harper & Row, 1989]

This is what life is really about, sensing the Spirit, recognizing the Holy Spirit at work, recreating, restoring life and inviting us into a collaboration. It is joining the work of the Holy Spirit that makes us part of this family. The mission is what creates the family.

I've been reading an amazing book by Gregory Boyle entitled *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. Boyle was the founder of Homeboy Ministries that helped former gang members rebuild their lives through real employment opportunities in one of the toughest neighborhoods in LA. I want to share a brief story from this book that speaks to this whole notion of Jesus' new family.

[Read from Pages 71-73]

Pema Chodron, an ordained Buddhist nun, writes of compassion and suggests that its truest measure lies not in our service of those on the margins, but in our willingness to see ourselves in kinship with them. In 1987 Dolores Mission Church declared itself a sanctuary church for the undocumented after passage of the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. Soon, recently arrived undocumented men from Mexico and Central America would sleep each night in the church (Guadalupe Homeless Project), and women and children, in the convent (Casa Miguel).

Attention followed, and lots of it. The media swarmed the place in these earliest days. As almost always happens, attention begets opposition. I used to dread clearing the parish's answering machine during this period. It always had a handful of hate messages and vague (and not so vague) death threats.

Once, while I turn the corner in front of the church, heading to a meeting in the projects, I am startled by letters spray-painted crudely across the front steps:

WETBACK CHURCH

The chill of it momentarily stops me. In an instant, you begin to doubt and question the price of things. I acknowledge how much better everything is when there is no cost and how I prefer being hoisted on shoulders in acclaim to the disdain of anonymous spray cans.

I arrive at the meeting and tell the gathered women about our hostile visitor during the night.

“I guess I’ll get one of the homies to clean it up later.”

Petra Saldana, a normally quiet member of the group, takes charge. “You will not clean that up.”

Now I was new at the parish and my Spanish was spotty. I understood the words she spoke but had difficulty circling in on the sense of it.

“You will not clean this up. If there are people in our community who are disparaged and hated and left out because they mojadados (wetbacks)...” Then she poised herself on the edge of the couch, practically ready to leap to her feet. “Then we shall be proud to call ourselves a wetback church.”

These women didn’t just want to serve the less fortunate they were anchored in some profound oneness with them and became them.

“That you may be one as the Father and I are one.”

Jesus and Petra are on the same page here. They chose a oneness in kinship and a willingness to live in others’ hearts. Jesus was not a man for others. He was one with others. There is a world of difference in that. Jesus didn’t seek the rights of lepers. He touched the leper even before he got around to curing him. He didn’t champion the cause of the outcast. He was the outcast. He didn’t fight for improved conditions for the prisoner. He simply said, “I was in prison.”

The strategy of Jesus is not centered in taking the right stand on issues, but rather in standing in the right place – with the outcast and those relegated to the margins.

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Who is my mother and brothers and sisters ? Those who find themselves collaborating with the Holy Spirit in bringing new life and hope.

Now I realize that this is a dramatic story and that we do not live in the Dolores Mission Church district. However, what you do have is your one wild and precious life. You have the ability to become animated by the Holy Spirit in doing the Will of God whenever you sense yourself being led.

I think you know what I mean, There is a person who calls people in the parish who are lonely and need some encouragement; a man who held his friend as he cried like a baby after the loss of his son; a parishioner who delivered a meal and seemed to deliver strength and courage as well to the family facing cancer treatment. There is a ten year old insider who reached out to a ten-year old outsider; there is a daughter-in-law that lovingly cares for an aging parent listening patiently to the same stories over and over again. There is a man half-way around the world that is sheltering people from violence in Syria; a Sunday school teacher listening to a youth's anguish about school troubles; a young man sharing his food with a fatherless child in a refugee camp; a grandmother lovingly caring for her grandchild whose parents seem incapable at the moment; a harried parent offering help to a neighbor whose car won't start and needs to get to work; the busy mother who picks up the children of her friend who is struggling with depression and is simply overwhelmed.

The truth is that we all can become entangled in the will of God at one time or many times, and when we do or when we hear of someone belonging to God's ways we know the answer to Jesus' question, "Who is my mother and brother and sister?"

Note:

I'm deeply indebted to the writing of John Shea in his commentary Eating with the Bridegroom on this matter of Jesus making a new family and for its composition being about the life of the Spirit. Getting "entangled in the will of God" is my own phrase. The story about the "wetback church," is from Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion by Gregory Doyle pages 71-73.