



A Family Reunion

Mark 3:20-35

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Again, it is a joy to be gathered with you here at the park today for worship and our picnic. Three weeks ago, we met at our church, and I gave you the charge, that as those who must learn to know our neighbors so we can love our neighbors, you were to go and worship with some other churches in the community. You may have worshipped in different places, but we had a good group and a wonderful time in worship at Downtown Baptist on June 10 – and then, last weekend, I’ve heard great things about our joining in worship with Roberts Memorial. I want you to know that Roberts Memorial UMC is 17 years older than Washington Street, founded in 1832 by the black Methodists in Alexandria. In our 169 years of co-existing, to the knowledge of their pastor and myself, this is the first time our two churches have worshipped together on a Sunday morning. I want you to know that I believe last Sunday to be of historic significance in the life of our church, and the witness of the Methodist Church in our community. It is a reminder and a witness of God’s continual work of reconciling all of us to himself – praise the Lord!

Our gathering today is still a part of your charge to get to know one another. Again, it’s hard to love those who you do not know. So in our time of picnicking and fellowship today, I hope you’ll take some time to get to know the folks around you. If you don’t know it, ask people their names as you share in meal across the picnic table or as you toss corn hole together. I know some of you have been sitting in worship with each other for months, perhaps even years, and still don’t know each other’s names.

Yet, the call to know each other in this place is a bit different than simply following Jesus’ articulation of the great commission, to love thy neighbor. Today, we learn that we are not mere neighbors to one another, but our connection goes much deeper.

Our text from Mark 3 offers us a story of how the people in the community, and the people in his family, thought Jesus was crazy. Verse 19 ends by telling us that Jesus has returned home, and upon his arrival, the crowds again swarm him. In fact, there are so many people, that Jesus and the disciples can’t eat.

Jesus’ family hears of what’s going on, and they come to restrain him, because the people were saying, “He’s out of his mind.”

Let’s all share in the pain of how closely we relate to what’s happening here: Jesus has become THAT family member. You know who I’m talking about? This is the family member who you had to unfollow on Facebook because every time they posted, you were filled with rage against what they had to say. The aunt, the uncle, or perhaps even the mom or dad, who shares a different perspective than you on what it means to live in a country that guarantees the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It’s the family member you try to position yourself

apart from at the family dinner table. It's the relative you let your spouse call to wish a happy birthday, because you just can't engage in conversation without wanting to scream at them. They need to be reigned in, because they are, as nicely as you can put it, 'off their rocker,' and their chaos is starting to bring negative attention to the family name.

In fact, Jesus is so far gone out of his mind, that some scribes have come from Jerusalem to speak their mind. That means they walked nearly 100 miles to speak their mind about this roaming rabbi in the region of Galilee. They say, "He has Beelzebul – that is, a demonic god from the Canaanite region – who is giving him the power of demons to cast out demons from others." Indeed, in Mark 3, just a few verses earlier, Jesus did demonstrate authority over unclean spirits.

The people believe Jesus must be possessed with a demon himself, because he is exerting authority over demons. They don't think he's just out of his mind – they think he's become the devil incarnate. Should we go back to our connection to family members? Are they still fitting the people's thoughts about Jesus? Endowed as evil beings?

But Jesus speaks for himself, offering his response in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, the kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, the 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."

Jesus is basically saying, "If I were Satan, why would I cast out demons? Wouldn't I let them continue to pursue demonic intentions? Why would Satan act against Satan?" Why would a person who agrees with what the demonic powers are doing stand against the demonic powers?

And understand, when Jesus says *Satan*, he's not necessarily speaking of some red-caped, pronged tail, horned fiery being. These devilish powers "name the forces and configurations of power that capture us and cause us to hurt ourselves, to hurt others, and to hurt God."¹ These demonic forces are the ones that convince us that our skin color or cultural heritage makes us superior to others. These evil inclinations convince us that our gender identity makes us worth more than any other gender identity. These bombastic urgings tell us that wealth and firepower will offer us peace and security. These are the inhumane voices telling us that we should be separating parents and children to make a political point instead of finding ways to allow these children to be supported and cared for by those who brought them into life, even if and when they have not followed proper procedure.

Jesus isn't casting out demons and unclean spirits because he agrees with them and just wants to be a more powerful version of such satanic happenings. Jesus is casting them out because he stands vehemently opposed to such events.

Not only does Jesus stand solidly opposed to such demonic perspectives, he then offers one of the most troubling statements in all the Bible. "Truly I tell you," Jesus says, "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, for he has an unclean spirit.”

This is a terrifying claim by Christ. If what Jesus says here is true, and who am I to say that what Jesus has to say is not true, then it is possible that I can do something so heinous that no amount of repentance and seeking absolution will bring me forgiveness. I would prefer such a category of sins to be listed out in a bit more detail, because you better believe I’m going to do everything I can to avoid such a wrongdoing.

It seems that what Jesus is criticizing is not simple wrongdoings – such naive misspeakings and mistakes he claims are forgivable. That which is *not* forgivable is blaspheme against the Holy Spirit. Housed in this context, as listed here in Mark 3, it seems what Jesus is naming as blaspheming the Holy Spirit is blaming the Holy Spirit for evil. These scribes have come to Jesus and have said that the work he has been doing in casting out unclean spirits and demons is indeed the work of evil. These people, who have falsely accused Jesus of devilish acts, have committed an unforgivable sin, for they have not only failed to see the good of what God has done, but they have attributed the good works of God to the evil one.

This is a challenging indictment, for it calls us to look beyond our limited understanding of how God works and acts in the world, and to allow ourselves to be surprised at how the Holy Spirit is working to make manifest God’s love in the world. It’s challenging to know that these leaders in the church are the ones being accused of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, because they were trying to claim that their knowledge of how God works didn’t fit into what they saw happening. Instead of allowing themselves to be transformed and enlightened by God’s work, they called the work of the Spirit evil, and the result is what Christ calls – and the only time Christ calls – their act unforgivable.

It is this very push back, and this sharp condemnation, against the leaders of the Synagogue, that leads us to our concluding verses in this chapter.

Jesus is central amidst this packed in crowd, and his mother and brothers came – and standing in the doorway, they called out to him. It was either so packed with people, or perhaps just so noisy in the space, that Jesus couldn’t hear his family calling to him. So, some people seated near Christ say to him, “Your mother and brothers and sisters are outside asking for you.”

In response, Jesus says what no mother ever wants to hear, “Who are my mother and brothers?” ... Knife meet heart. ... Can you imagine ever having your child say this to you? (And I don’t mean your four-year-old, who doesn’t know the unfairness of such psychological warfare yet. Screaming “you’re not my mom” at age 4 is vastly different than having your 30-year-old son say it.) Really, can you imagine the pain that Jesus’ mother must have felt? Even if Jesus’ action in denying his mother is meant as a way to establish a more well-connected community of followers, his actions have a powerfully hurtful impact on his mother nevertheless.ⁱⁱ

I can’t tell quite what Jesus is doing here. In some ways, I think Jesus is challenging the role of blood relatives in our lives. Nibs Stroupe, a Presbyterian pastor, suggests that “those who love us, and nurture us also help bind us to Satan.”ⁱⁱⁱ For example, he offers, how many of us grew up

in families where racism, prejudice, and xenophobia were normal? How many of us were taught to fear other groups of people because those who loved us most thought exposure to those groups could be detrimental to our well being. We were taught such perspectives, and indeed these prejudices, by the people who loved us most because it was believed they were necessary to find and maintain life. Yet, Stroupe states, “As I came to hear other voices from God’s Spirit – voices that told me that racism was not God’s will – I began to be in internal conflict with my family and my community.”^{iv}

In this way, Jesus’ departure from the family is the same challenging conviction he offers of the scribes. We too often claim a historic viewpoint of God’s working in the world as mandatory – our parents and churches give us no choice. In doing so, we don’t allow ourselves to be awakened to the reality that the Spirit is working in other voices, other faces, other places, other identities, and other communities where we previously have been unwilling or unable to see God at work.

Amidst this challenging perspective, one that calls us to consider our own practices and prejudices, it’s worth noting, I don’t think Jesus is being anti-family. He’s not really speaking ill of his mother, his brothers, or his sisters. I mean, fast-forward three years, while hanging on the cross, Jesus calls out to John to care for his mother, Mary. He cares about his family.

But, in the vein of allowing ourselves to see God working in new ways, Jesus is challenging our understanding of family. He says, “Here are my mothers and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and my sister, and my mother.” “Insiders and outsiders are now defined, not by blood, but by the commitment to doing God’s will.”^v

And this is our call as a community. Our call as a congregation, our call as a faith community, it’s not to be each other’s neighbors – our call is to be family. We are not just to share our love with one another, we are to share in life with each other. Our call is to know each other, to live with one another, to celebrate each other’s celebrations, and to mourn each other’s losses. As the body of Christ, as the family of faith, we are not just another neighborhood who passes each other by – but we are mothers, brothers, fathers, and sisters, children of God sharing in life together. So today, let us spend some time claiming each other as family.

Turn to your neighbor, and say, “You’re family! I want to get to know you!”

Today isn’t just a church picnic – it’s a family reunion.

ⁱ Nibs Stroupe. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.

ⁱⁱ Richard Swanson. *Provoking the Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller’s Commentary*. The Pilgrim Press: Cleveland, 2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ Stroupe.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Judith Hoch Wray. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 3*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009.