

Gospel - Mark 3: 20-35

Pentecost 2

Sermon 6.6.21

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Good morning, and thank you for another opportunity to share from this place. This morning let's look afresh at this scripted story from Mark's gospel by drawing on information from three different vantage points:

- Historical; brief review
- Surrounding situations; What just happened?
-and for balance, -Lectio-Divina perspective.

The Gospel of Mark is generally accepted to have been written in the 7th decade of the Christian Era, close to the destruction of the Temple at a time when traumatized blame was running rampant. Hurtful divides between traditional Temple Jews and its fledgling Christian fringe group resulted in a long divorce, separating two twin trees with shared root system and history, causing extended damage to both. This has resulted in 2000 years (til today) of misusing scriptures like this one by giving explicit permission, as if licensed by God's own word, to persecute, harass, blame, and cause problems of basic survival for Jewish people. As if they constitute the "unforgiven" and are therefore only fit for continued punishment. The residual grief, anger, and loss experienced between the two religions cannot be ignored. These wounds run deep, seeping into the fabric of religious culture and into the literature written during those troubled times. Mark was a follower and interpreter of the Apostle Peter. Due to Peter's stature as first rock of the church, Mark was afforded the credentials associated with Peter's apostolic authority, and was particularly favored in Rome.

Now let's quickly review the happenings in chapter 3 prior to the event in focus which begins with verse 20.

First, there is the infamous and controversial healing by Jesus in the temple on Sabbath; Noteably, Mark has Jesus turn and look with anger at all those silent around him. At the moment just before healing, Jesus looked around in anger. Wow, has the portrait been painted yet? That healing event prompted the Pharisees and Herodians to conspire against Jesus. Followed by the sermon from a boat on the lake due to the crowds surrounding. And later, twelve men are named by Jesus as appointed disciples. Then, rather abruptly they are back home again, perhaps hoping for some respite to catch their breath, but find there is not elbow room to feed oneself, let alone a crowd of excited followers.

Now the stage is set for the drama of well-cloaked exchanges brought into light by the parable, woven by Jesus as if improvising the tale on the spot.

The main characters in this little soap opera include:

- Jesus and the first 12 disciples-men;
- The Crowd
- (ie various 'other' followers and diverse devotees):

-The Family of Jesus:

Those who knew him well, or thought they did.

-The Scribes as representing official Jerusalem Temple authority

It is interesting that, although Mark is the first gospel to be written, he makes no mention of Joseph in any verse of its text. But even so, it is in his Gospel that for the first time in Christian written history we are given some slight biographical glimpse at the family of Jesus. In this scene, Jesus' very source of being; his authority and power for doing good will be openly challenged. Jesus is aware of disparaging remarks spread by the scribes raising suspicions that his power for doing good was from the Evil One. Jesus smoothly takes charge of this 3-ring circus being set up to discredit and embarrass him in the presence of his gathered followers and guests. Please recall that the troublesome scribes are now included, by direct invitation of the Host, under the tent of his hospitality. So, Jesus' chosen words and well-reasoned actions are those of one who is self-assured and knows how and when to behave in public. He takes stock of the overheard spiritual insults and then initiates direct conversation by calling the leaders to himself. We're on Jesus' turf now, and on his terms. Without making a scene, Jesus skillfully holds up the mirror to his Jewish brothers in the faith, as well as the faces of his family. He tells them a new story about what they see and who they are now becoming. One new family; true and loving.

This 'real time' allegory is Jesus' not too subtle, but spontaneous way of letting the scribes know that he, as the present host, is fully aware of what is going on around him and his guests. The temple leadership is figuratively trying to tie up Jesus with the ropes of gossip and warning the dangers of his particular brand of craziness. AND, in this ring, on the other end of the rope are the members of his immediate family who are themselves prepared to literally tie him up in order to protect him and his family from more threats and danger. This is what is known as being stuck between a rock and a hard place, but Jesus handles it like Houdini!

On this occasion the mother and brothers of Jesus came to him when he returned to Nazareth, but it was not a friendly visit. His family heard some things about him and they went to see for themselves as people were saying he is beside himself. This phrase 'beside himself' was a colloquial Semitism that literally meant outside himself or out of his mind and is described as a severe mental disturbance. His harsher critics were even suggesting that Jesus was demon possessed.

Now this is beginning to sound like a planned joint attempt to tie up Jesus, the strong man, in his own hometown and effectively plunder the household of new Judaism which is being experienced in this house with his new family tight now. In this plan, one part could distract and restrain him long enough for the other part to disperse the crowd while placing the blame on that crazy Jesus and his looney followers. This plan could indeed plunder this current and future gathering of the healed and the healing, full of their newfound freedom and its joy. Yet fragile and vulnerable as it risks being cut off and scattered before it begins.

A thankful woven tapestry broad-cloth comprised of threads from every age, sex, and color source-This sacred offspring, a living extension of Holy Mother Judaism is manifest here at home full of people healed well-fed and free.

It is for the benefit of our four main characters that Jesus non-violently responds to their malicious plan by setting clear the boundaries for his turf, which he gracefully accomplishes without excusing his accusers. Jesus echoes back a familiar Jewish concept of forgiveness, which would not be lost on the Scribes. In the story

“Jonah and the Whale”; Jonah’s sin was that he made a judgment based on mistaken identification. Jonah had confused his vision of what is holy with God’s vision of what is holy. Stuck alone in this binding case of mistaken identity there can be no hope of forgiveness. In Matthew’s later edited version of the story he has added a come-back from the Scribes, saying “Well, if that’s true then show us a miracle; give us a sign. To which Jesus responds, “I will not give you any sign except for the sign of Jonah. Once again, the Scribes would have known precisely that this reading was part of the Yom Kippur Day of Atonement ritual given to remind us of the importance of knowing that God is the one who knows, and God alone is the merciful and just judge. So appropriately, Jesus offers the stern cautionary reminder against using mistaken judgment to mis-identify the source of another’s expressed being or work.

Perhaps this is the place to read Mary Oliver’s poem, ‘Maybe’. We have to find someplace because we love her writing, and in this she refers to these passages about Jesus.

Sweet Jesus, talking his melancholy madness, stood up in the boat and the sea lay down, silky and sorry.

So everybody was saved that night. But you know how it is when something different crosses the threshold -- the uncles mutter together, the women walk away, the young brother begins to sharpen his knife. Nobody knows what the soul is. It comes and goes like the wind over the water--sometimes, for days, you don't think of it.

Maybe, after the sermon, after the multitude was fed, one or two of them felt the soul slip forth like a tremor of pure sunlight before exhaustion, that wants to swallow everything, gripped their bones and left them

Miserable and sleepy, as they are now, forgetting how the wind tore at the sails before he rose and talked to it tender and luminous and demanding as he always was-- a thousand times more frightening than the killer storm.

*The mystery of the tied up strongman is being revealed parabolically through Jesus himself. I hear gospel most clearly in this weird parable of the tied up strong man in the middle of his struggles with family and religious authorities. The parable is good news not because Jesus is being nice like you’re supposed to be in a family, nor because Jesus is respecting the authorities like you’re supposed to do when you’re from Galilee and the officials waltz in from the Jerusalem home office. It is good news because it portrays Jesus being himself, gracious and generous, right in the middle of a very difficult place, struggling for God’s coming new creation and the reign of Christ’s peace.

Amen.

*David Schnasa Jacobsen “Working Preacher” Commentary