

June 10, 2012 – Proper 5 B – 2nd Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 3:20-35

Our text begins like this: Crowds came to where Jesus was staying – Jesus and his friends not even able to eat – Why? What was going on?

Well, look back a little – Jesus had gone into the synagogue and healed a man on the Sabbath – infuriating the authorities who demanded that everyone else keep the absolute letter of the Law. The Pharisees accused Jesus of breaking that law, of WORKING on the Sabbath, and then, Mark says, began to plot against him: to find a way to kill him.

The story continues. To get some peace, Jesus went out into the country, but the eager crowds followed him. And everywhere he went, they listened eagerly, and he healed many, and, it says, “whenever unclean spirits saw him, they fell down before him - in fear, we assume - and cried out, “YOU ARE THE SON OF GOD”

So ordinary folks, the nobodies of the time, were perfectly aware that Jesus was something special, someone sent from God.

And the demons knew.

But the people who ought to have known, who had the law and the prophets, the men to whom God had entrusted his own wisdom, did not choose to know.

Finally he went home with his few closest friends, but the crowds followed even there.

And that’s where today’s story begins. But to see what’s going on, you’re going to need that background, the context.

First Jesus’ **Family goes out – “to restrain him”** – that is, to bring him home again, to reason with him,

Why? Because “people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” It ought to make you wonder, WHAT people? Not the crowds, for sure. They were following him, and drinking his worlds like water.

But some people, anyway, were spreading the word – “Mary’s boy, the one she thinks so much of - he’s nuts.”

This was serious. There were real consequence to his family, or might be. Shame, for one thing. Embarrassment. And maybe they also feared for his life. It was really the family’s responsibility to control him.

Secondly, there were the Scribes – religious scholars, lawyers from Jerusalem - They come down to see what Jesus is up to, and pronounce: **“He has Beelzebul, and by the rule of the demons he casts out demons.”**

Why do they care what Jesus is doing? Because many people were apparently saying, "JESUS can cast out demons – and the scribes and Pharisees can not."

There were consequence to the scribes, too. In their case also it involved shame. They are being accused by ordinary people who know nothing at all, of being less holy, less spiritually competent, and their prayers less effective than Jesus'. That is impossible! So it is the religious leaders' responsibility to control him.

But here is the core of the whole text: Jesus speaks to them in parables – "Can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, it cannot stand..." AND ..."no one can enter into a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man – THEN the house can indeed be plundered " implications: Jesus is not in league with Satan – if he were, no one would be healed at all, no demons would be cast out; They'd all be given free rein – and free reign, too! But instead, Jesus has "tied up" Satan, the strong man, by the greater power of God in him, and he (Jesus) s happily "plundering" Satan's "house," setting free all the captives he finds there!

Why? Because demons hurt and kill and destroy the work of God and God's people. Jesus, as the bringer of the kingdom of God, has come to utterly destroy the works of Satan and all his demons.

That's his retort – a stinging one, but the picture was painted with incredibly powerful words, and you may be sure his audience saw it vividly.

In the case of the scribes, Jesus assumes that they do know, but resist and reject Jesus as the bringer OF THAT Kingdom, as the authentic prophet of God , and can only see him as one who challenges THEIR ownership of God's power and word and authority.

So he has a punch line to Scribes: "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," (because, Mark goes on, they – "the scribes, had said, "He has an unclean Spirit."

He turns back to the issue of his family. His own family members, who love him do NOT understand, but they do fear for him, and perhaps for themselves. His mother and family came near ; "and standing outside, they sent to him and called him (presumably to take him home.) The crowd tells him that they have come asking for him. And Jesus delivers a **Punch line to family: "Who are my mother and my brothers? And looking at those around him** (at ordinary folks who find they have nothing more to do than to sit there and listen, to those who DO want to hear,) **he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."**

So note. The comment about an "eternal sin" is directed at the Scribes, not at the crowds, not at his family, and not at you.

It is a stern, even a severe warning – a threat if you like – one they perfectly well understood. It is the highest form of rebuke, the sort that authorities usually find it easy to hand down to others!-

Jesus is crazy, though. He scandalizes us too, if we really ever hear him. He says, ORDINARY people will be forgiven anything, anything at all.

BUT when the scribes, the most religious – the ones who KNOW what God is about - “blaspheme against the Holy Spirit” – that one is “guilty of an eternal sin” and “can never have forgiveness.”

What on earth is going on? It is typical of Jesus’ habit of exaggerating to make a point. Obviously, even the scribes COULD repent and change their hearts and minds, but if they do not, then they are guilty of far more than threatening Jesus and the crowds, of power-mongering and religious control, as if those were not sin enough.

So what are they doing that is so evil? They are guilty of attributing God’s great GOOD to EVIL, to SATAN, the enemy of Israel, the bane of humanity, and the sworn enemy of God himself. They are guilty of offering to HIM, to SATAN, praise for doing something that only GOD can do –and that only God WOULD do.

They are giving credit to SATAN and not to GOD for the work of GOD. They are even warning people that the healings they have received, the freedom they now know, the joy and peace they experience in Jesus’ presence are all counterfeit - all works of Evil, done by an agent of Evil.

And that is unforgiveable – unthinkable – unimaginable – It is something no Jew would ever in his right mind do. They knew it, and so did Jesus.

So here’s the deal –The word in this text to you, and to the ordinary folks crowding around Jesus, the word to everyone who gives thanks and praise and honor to God for what God does: relax.

This isn’t for you. It’s not directed at you. You aren’t the ones in trouble. You are simply (and deliciously!) are overhearing a rebuke to those who have just tried to threaten Jesus, to dismiss your own experience, and to shake your confidence by insisting that the good and wonderful things God has already done for you are NOT from God at all! You get to see Jesus lash out at the high and mighty who thought they had the best of Jesus. And probably, you laugh!

So this passage is there for a reason: to reassure you ordinary people, all of us, really, not to be frightened when others call what is really GOOD – the gifts God has given you – EVIL - and from the Evil one!

The second part is similar – that is, it works in the same way. Jesus’ family is freaking out, worried about him, and worried for themselves. Shame is a powerful weapon in the middle east, as you know from hearing the news of modern-day “honor killings”. His mom wants to bring Jesus home, to persuade him that he doesn’t need to do all THAT crazy stuff, to speaking out that way to the authorities, to doing things that he KNOWS will get him in trouble in order to be righteous before God, in order to do God’s will. He can fit in. He can be a normal Jewish boy: get married, have children, live happily in Nazareth – or wherever – be a REAL Rabbi. And they are being entirely realistic and normal. This is what you would do, too. It is what many families do right now when a son announces the desire to go to serve God in some dangerous place, to do some dangerous work because God has called her to it.

And Jesus' word to his family, when they arrive to interrupt his gathering and get him out of there, is to turn to the crowds who are sitting at his feet. They are the ones hanging on his every word, trusting him, loving him without fear for themselves OR FOR HIM. They are ordinary folks who believed SOMETHING about him, even if they had no idea yet exactly who he was, men and women who were not offended at him. He turns to them and calls THEM his "mother – and brothers and sisters –"

Again, he is telling the truth and he is exaggerating to make a point. He is not dishonoring, let alone disowning his family – and they know it .

But he is redefining family at the same time. Jesus is going to do what God has called him to do, no matter what anyone says. He has a journey to make that will end at the cross. He is on his way, healing as he goes, and preaching, and casting out demons, and letting the coming kingdom be seen in him – and in what he does. If his family tries to stop him, they will find that he has slipped out of their grasp, just as he slips out of the grasp of the Scribes. And those who do follow him become his "family."

It is a rebuke – a warning – but it is not hostile. Jesus' new family is inclusive of ALL who hear the word of God and do it. That includes his own family if they wish, but for SURE those who are paying attention. We minimize this when we read it, but that group of folks listening to Jesus did so at some real risk to themselves – at least the risk of losing their reputation among respectable people. Perhaps they also risked even their membership in the synagogue, their employment, perhaps, or of losing their customers, or even of losing the status of being seen as a worthy family for a son or daughter to join by marriage. Obviously they had heard whatever Jesus' family had heard. SOMEone, or someONES were saying he was crazy, demented, nuts, and dangerous to himself and to them. But there they were, anyway. And Jesus sees what that means to them – and to him.

So the message for us in this second half? The same as to the crowd. Anyone who wants to be part of the family, well, just "Do the will of God!" Talking about it doesn't cut it, trying to staying safe and not making any waves doesn't work, complaining that you CAN'T do it for all the social, psychological, or financial excuses we so often hold up to God for approval wont get you anywhere either. It's simple. Just "DO the will of God - !" And really, most of the time we know what that is!

So Mark, ever the realist, wants us to hear these couple of things loud and clear: Give glory to God for what GOD does (Do not be like the Scribes and do not fear them, either) and trust Jesus' craziness and his ridiculous and impossible understanding of the will of God and DO what he says. (Do not be like his fearful family.)

So, you see? This isn't a scary text. It's a wonderfully freeing one for you who praise God for all God does, and for you who are ready to toss aside everything you are hanging on to to "do" whatever he says! Amen. And yes, Alleluia!