

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 06/09/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday After Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, June 9th	Mark 3:20-35
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The church divided

In this week's lectionary text, Jesus is embroiled in a conflict with the scribes and with his own family. The greatest obstacles to Jesus' ministry appear to be the religious establishment and his own family. This pattern is seen repeatedly across the history of the church. Sometimes the greatest source of resistance to the work of the Holy Spirit in the world is from inside the church. Despite such conflicts, when Jesus defines what it means to be His family, He emphasizes inclusion rather than exclusion.

Mark 3:20-35 Commentary

The text falls within Jesus' public ministry (1:16-8:26), specifically His teaching ministry (3:13-6:6). A great crowd has already begun to follow Jesus because of His healing and preaching. Immediately before the text, Jesus called the twelve. The Parable of the Sower (4:1-20) – the fruitfulness of those who hear the Word - follows the text. The text is bracketed by crowds and family. The text opens with crowds surrounding Jesus. His family went out to seize Him, fearing He had lost His mind (vv.20-21). The text closes with crowds surrounding Jesus and His family attempting to "save" Him again. At this point, Jesus redefines His family (vv.31-35). Bracketed within this conflict between Jesus and His family is a conflict between Jesus and the scribes (v.22 and v.28-30). At the heart of the text are parables of Satan's end (vv. 23-27).

²⁰ Then he went home, and the crowd gathered again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ And when his family heard it, they went out to seize him, for they were saying, "He is out of his mind."

After Jesus withdrew to the mountain from the crowds and then appointed the twelve, he returns home (the house [perhaps Peter's home] where He was staying in Capernaum, the base for His Galilean ministry) and the crowds gather again to the point that Jesus and His disciples could not even take the time to have a meal. When news of this gets back to Jesus' family, they think that He is out of His mind and thus went out to seize Him and "save" Him from Himself! The irony runs deep.

²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem were saying, "He is possessed by Beelzebul," and "by the prince of demons he casts out the demons."

The conflict between Jesus and the religious authorities is escalating. Unlike previous challenges against Jesus for blaspheming (2:7), breaking customs (2:16), or even breaking the Sabbath (2:23-3:12), now scribes were accusing

Him of being in league with Beelzebul. The scribes could not ignore that Jesus was doing powerful works and thus their only tactic was to challenge Him on the source of His power.

These scribes were also from Jerusalem suggesting this is no longer a local conflict. Perhaps these reasons help explain why Jesus' family is concerned about Him.

²³ And he called them to him and said to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but is coming to an end. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his goods, unless he first binds the strong man. Then indeed he may plunder his house.

Verse 30 suggests the "them" of v.23 refers to the scribes. Jesus does not respond to the charge of being in league with Beelzebul but goes straight to the root – Satan. Jesus completely repudiates the notion that He is working with Satan. First, if the satanic sphere were divided against itself, it would not stand. Second, Satan must first be bound before His sphere of influence can be challenged. Since Jesus has already exorcised demons in His ministry, He must therefore be more powerful than Satan. Such power could only come from God.

²⁸ "Truly, I say to you, all sins will be forgiven the children of man, and whatever blasphemies they utter, ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit never has forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin" — ³⁰ for they were saying, "He has an unclean spirit."

Verse 28 illustrates the upcoming substitutionary atonement and how all sins will be forgiven except for those who continue to attribute to Satan that which is accomplished by the power of God. Persistent and unrepentant resistance against the work of the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven.

³¹ And his mother and his brothers came, and standing outside they sent to him and called him. ³² And a crowd was sitting around him, and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers are outside, seeking you." ³³ And he answered them, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking about at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother."

The closing verses of this passage feature again the crowds and Jesus' family. Joseph is not listed as part of Jesus' family suggesting he may have already died by this time. Rather than reject His family, Jesus broadens the definition of His family. Rather than rejection, this definition of family emphasizes inclusion.

Reflection

In the controversial 1979 Monty Python movie, *Life of Brian*, the crowds mistakenly follow Brian whom they think is the Messiah. The crowd appears outside of Brian's home and his mother is incredulous. She confronts him: "What are all those people doing out there?... Come on! What have you been up to, my lad?... There's a multitude out there!... Well, they can stop following you right now." This scene from the satirical movie is perhaps closer to the reaction of Jesus' family than we feel comfortable admitting.

Many new believers throughout the era of the church often face a similar reaction from non-believer friends and family members. In some ways this is expected. Those not reborn in the Spirit cannot understand what has come over their loved one and thus their misguided actions are often out of love in an attempt to re-conform them to the prevailing worldly culture. Far worse, however, is that our history teaches us how the greatest source of resistance to the Holy Spirit in the world is often from the established church leadership of the day.

A good example is the resistance to out-pouring of the Holy Spirit during the First Great Awakening in the eighteenth century by the Old Side/Old Light churches. One source of conflict within the Old Side churches was the issue of itinerant preachers such as George Whitefield and Gilbert Tennent trampling on the turf of existing pastors. Why on earth was there a need for a revival when duly ordained ministers were already present?! Some argued that the First Great Awakening experienced the second greatest outpouring of the Holy Spirit since the first Christian Pentecost. To the Old Side, the power of the Spirit-led preaching by such itinerant preachers was not the point, these preachers were not following the rules. Even worse, some, like Tennent, did not have a European seminary education – the nerve of the man! When viewed in this light, there are some remarkable similarities here with the criticisms the scribes had against Jesus and His ministry. Not surprisingly, variations of this Old Side/New Side controversy have continued to plague the church ever since.

This example illustrates how our greatest risk of spiritual stumbling comes not from our areas of weakness but from what we consider to be our strength – our source of pride. Various controversies and splits have plagued the church throughout its history. Each side of a given issue is quick to defend their positions, often accusing the other of apostasy. However, these days there are hardly enough people in the church to care. As this text reveals, the heart of the matter is the fight with Satan, not with each other. At the end of the day, we are all part of the same inclusive family (v.35): *“For whoever does the will of God, he is my brother and sister and mother.”*

As Jesus points out, if a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. Does this apply to the imperial church? With all the division in the church, perhaps it is no surprise how many suggest we are now living in post-Christendom. Whereas the family in Jewish society also conveyed membership in the covenant, Jesus demonstrated those doing the will of God were the true members of His family and thus members of God’s family. Therefore, in much the same way, those clinging to church membership and specifically denominational affiliation are merely dividing the kingdom.

