

Message – Rev. Scott Schellenberger June 6, 2021

A House Divided - Mark 3:20-35

I'll be honest: I find this week's Gospel reading troubling and hard. It is my first Sunday here at Zion as your pastor. After reading the text for today I spoke with my wife Pastor Sue and asked her, "Why did you get off so easy last week preaching on John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to die and rise again for our sin, and I get to preach on an apocalyptic text telling people that their only true family are not their mother and father and other blood relatives but outsiders that gather together...on my first Sunday?" Also, it would be completely irresponsible as a preacher of the gospel to also avoid addressing the issue of the 215 indigenous children found dead at a residential school in Kamloops this week. They are only a portion of children across Canada that never went home from residential schools.

It's with this in mind that I come to the week's lectionary reading, and find a Jesus who scandalizes his hometown by accusing his religious leaders of blasphemy, and publicly disowning his mother and siblings. If you need Jesus to make your life decisions less painful and costly, this lection is *definitely* not for you.

The setting of the text is Nazareth. Jesus has returned home after inaugurating his ministry, and it's clear from the size and frenzy of the crowds pressing against him that his reputation has preceded him. After all, much has happened since the carpenter's son first left home. The heavens have opened at his baptism. He has survived a forty-day fast in the wilderness. He has driven out unclean spirits, healed the sick, eaten with sinners, chosen his disciples, and declared himself the Lord of the Sabbath.

Through these and other acts, he has mesmerized every crowd he's come into contact with, stirring up such hope, excitement, and yearning in people's hearts that they just can't leave him alone. So, they follow him to Nazareth and pour into

the house where he's staying, pressing in so tight that Jesus can't even lift his hand to his mouth to feed himself.

Needless to say, this state of affairs is more than enough to alarm both his family and the religious authorities. Jesus's mother and siblings arrive on the scene first, intending to stage an intervention. Mortified by the neighborhood rumors that Jesus has lost his mind, Mary and her other children stand outside the jam-packed house and call for Jesus, hoping in vain to "restrain" him.

The scribes show up shortly thereafter (having come down from Jerusalem to investigate this new teacher) and declare that Jesus is evil and a threat — not a benign healer empowered by God, but a fiend possessed by Beelzebub, "the ruler of the demons."

The fact is, neither Jesus's family nor the scribes from Jerusalem are evil or ill-intentioned. They are earnest people dedicated to maintaining stability during a fraught time. Jesus's family desires order and peace in the domestic sphere, and the scribes desire order and peace in the religious sphere. Don't we all? They're not out to thwart God; they just want to keep things respectable.

Which is why, I think, I find Jesus's behavior in this lection so upsetting. The Jesus of Mark 3:20–35 is harsh, austere, and impatient. Instead of responding compassionately to the scribes, he shreds their arguments with clever parables, and accuses them of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit — an "unforgiveable" sin. Instead of going out to greet and reassure his mother and siblings, he rejects their interventions, renounces their claims on his life, and trades them in for a new family of his own making.

In this lection, Jesus proves himself even more provocative, and pays a high price. Can you picture the scene? Outside the house stand the insiders — the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to look like, and Jesus doesn't fit the bill. *Inside* the house sit the outsiders — the misfits,

the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They're not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry. And in the midst of them? Smack in the center of the sick, the insane, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox and the unwashed? There sits Jesus, saying, "This. *This* is my family."

When I think of Mary standing outside that house, waiting for her son, my heart breaks. I think of my own mother, and of the many times I have kept her waiting. I think of my son and daughter, and of how devastated I would feel if they renounced me.

I think of the children stolen from their parents and taken to residential schools never to return and their parents' heartbreak. Anglican National Indigenous Archbishop Mark Macdonald, in reference to the discovery of 215 children's bodies in mass graves at BC Residential School writes,

"I once heard someone say that Jesus, who died on the Cross, also died in the Holocaust. If that is true, they will find him among those children [whose bodies were recently discovered at a residential school in BC]. But, we who have seen him die on the Cross and suffer with us, know that this is not the end of the story. He came back to us whole and sound, in a Resurrection body, from the World to Come. A World that he said we could start living in now, through love, through prayer, through the Sacred Circle, and through his Body and Blood. His justice, his truth, his love is walking in us and through us towards that day and we have seen it. It will rise, is rising, with those children and with a truth that could not be hidden."

It helps to imagine that in this gospel this moment of breakage and rupture costs Jesus something dear. He *knows* he is Mary's son. He knows the agony of letting her go. But he knows that he's God's Son first, and that his divine identity must beat all others. Still. I hope that it's with a secret lump in his throat that he bids his family goodbye.

At the same time, I can't help but imagine what it must have felt like to be *inside* the house with Jesus that day. I know intimately and well, as perhaps you do, the hunger to belong, to have someone safe and loving to belong to. Regardless of our circumstances, we all know what it's like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That's exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family.

Yes, Jesus divides the house, and that process hurts. But he doesn't divide it to make us homeless. He divides it to rebuild it. To make it more spacious, more welcoming, and more beautiful. The Spirit of God is neither insane nor evil; the Spirit completes the good work he begins. His will be a house of healing for the whole world.