

Mark 3:20-35

Nazareth is small, very small. As a colleague put it “this is the kind of community where the sign on the edge of the village would say “Welcome to Nazareth” while on the other side, the flip side, it would read “Thank you for visiting Nazareth.”

In a small town or tight knit community, it's hard for a family if their child is having one of those little moments most would rather the world didn't see. In this case, a son...their son, is doing things or accused of doing things or acting in ways that cause embarrassment that might lead to ridicule or some other kind of trouble for the family. This is really problematic in an honour and shame culture.

Jesus has come back home, but the people aren't whispering about the hometown boy who went out in the world made good but rather it is a hometown boy who is acting strange and disruptive. So much so that the rumours are making the rounds that he has “gone out of his mind.” Hearing this, his family come to collect him, to restrain him. All they want to do is find a way to either take him home and get him some help or get him off the stage, so he doesn't embarrass them any longer or make them feel uncomfortable or apologetic or defensive when meeting their neighbours.

Perhaps they aren't terribly concerned about whether his actions offend the authorities because that “religious stuff” is somebody else's business, but it does affect them directly because it has the possibility of making their lives unhappy. After all, they have to live here and deal with and face their religious leaders, the rabbis and the others who gather on the Sabbath at the local synagogue.

Instead of complying this son gives his family the brush off in a way that seems cringe-worthy. “Who are my mother and brothers?” he says, ignoring them in favour of the friends and followers he has gathered around himself. One of the problems for us is that this particular son is Jesus himself. He doesn’t appear to care about his family’s anxiety or about what people are saying about him. His message throughout the Gospels is consistent with his comments here; nothing comes before your commitment to God, not even your family.

This mindset was important in the early church. For many of them following Jesus had caused a rift in their relationships with their families and their traditional faith communities. They had to create new networks of support among their fellow Christians, relationships that had their centre in God’s love.

This was Jesus central message...love...valuing people, all people, as precious children of God with incredible worth and dignity no matter their situation. Jesus was one to notice and take exceptional care of those who were weak and vulnerable, especially the ones seen as less in the eyes of the world. Those who followed him were called and equipped and inspired to do the same. Theirs was and is and will always be to follow his lead in welcoming children and the child-like no matter their age, to join in the care and healing of the sick and to see those with varied abilities as teachers and gifts, making it clear that they are not burdens but equals. This ethic of care extended also to God’s beloved creation, with a call to steward well...to live gently, gracefully, and peaceably.

All these things were embedded in the words, wisdom and teaching Jesus was sharing and the life in God he was advocating. To many, to those who followed, it was impossibly good news. It was absolutely freeing. This was especially true for those whose lives and person had been negated by their actions or their circumstances.

In Jesus' day this included those with infirmities or illnesses, those who were poor or dependent, and the ones considered unclean in their society, people for whom the mainstream of life left them with no hope or future. Who is this in our day, in this time and place, in your time and place?

My first thought is for the ones lost on the streets, struggling with addictions or mental health. For these friends, the news of God's unconditional love and welcome is great news, gospel news, especially when embodied by others.

This care, this love, never stops trying, never gives up, never ignores, or turns away in disgust. It keeps coming back through the words and actions of people, fellow human beings who serve as outreach and social workers, addictions counsellors, caring front line workers including police, paramedics, and health care staff. All those who engage people with dignity and respect. Those who believe this message, even if only intuitively, of God's unwavering unconditional love and care for all people...no matter the circumstance. This is good news now and it was good news to the people sitting around Jesus in our gospel reading from Mark.

To the others in the gospel reading, "the scribes who came down from Jerusalem" and some of the religious folk, Jesus' teaching and comments are infuriating. The good

news he is professing is light years beyond the religious scorekeeping they've been taught and known all their lives. For them, Jesus is out of his mind, teaching and doing things for which he has no authority to teach or do.

And so, perhaps understandably, their reaction and that of his family is to tell him to come home, to keep quiet and do his duty as an obedient son. But of course, Jesus' couldn't do that. It would require him to abandon his core convictions about God, humanity, creation, and love. It would negate his message and his ministry.

As much as he may feel pulled in two directions, wanting to fit in with people and feel accepted by family, friends, neighbours and colleagues, he cannot acquiesce to their demand. What compels him, what calls him, what calls us, is deeper, so much deeper...it is the voice of God. A voice that speaks honestly, hopefully and unreservedly of grace...of God's unconditional love and hope for all people in Jesus Christ. It is freeing, it is compelling and it is true.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.