

# Family

## Mark 3:20-35

Today's scripture talks about family. I am not an expert – but I know a little about family. I am child number 9 of my parents' 12 children. My mother was from a family of 14 children and my father was the only son in a family of 7 children. My family is so close knit that we have 4 family gatherings or reunions. Each March my siblings gather for a party to celebrate the fact that 4 of my brothers share a birthday week. My father's family will gather next weekend in Kansas City where 3 of his sisters raised their families. My mother's family gather every even year in Los Angeles where her siblings raised their families. And my maternal grandparents' families gather on the same year as my mother's family for a family reunion. Leroy brings to my family 6 children and three siblings and their families. In fact on yesterday I was not able to attend the women's event because our son who lives in Petersburg, Ontario was in Windsor with his family. They brought greetings from their extended family.

Nathan and Alex married in April and those two families were/are united. June is the time of marriages and weddings and many of you have wedding anniversaries this month. Even today, we united the families of Bill and Ilene and now they are a larger and more connected clan.

In immediate and extended families there is plenty room for love and support, but also for misunderstanding and confusion. One way to read our passage is as a drama portraying the difficulty of the discernment between good and evil, and between who is in the family and who is out of the family. What the passage seems to say is that this discernment is not easy and that we often are siding with Satan when we think we are being faithful to God.

The setting is a house in which Jesus is attempting to eat dinner after a long day. The huge, frenzied crowd of Jews and Gentiles are desperate to get close to the man reported to possess power over sickness and demons. Jesus' family is on the way to the house in order to bring him home because they are afraid he is mad. The scribes from Jerusalem are also after him, believing him to be in league with Satan. Jesus responds to this accusation with a series of short images. The first set shows that something divided against itself cannot stand: a kingdom, a house, Satan himself. **Wendy Farley**

Jesus took seriously the realities of Satan and other demonic powers, including Beelzebub, whose name means "lord of the flies." Satan does not necessarily mean a personality with horns and a red tail, but it does name a demonic power that is actively engaged against the compassionate and reconciling love of God. This is the reality that Jesus named here, our captivity to the powers of evil signified by "Satan," powers that continue to seek our allegiance.

Satan and Beelzebub name the forces and configurations of power that capture us and cause us to hurt ourselves, to hurt others, and to hurt God. To name a few of these, there is the power of race, which tells us to believe that one group is superior to another simply because of skin color or cultural heritage. There is the power of patriarchy, which tells us that men should dominate women. There is the power of materialism, which roars at us that money gives us life. And the power of militarism—the belief that weapons and war bring us peace and security—causes us to kill one another, often in the name of God. Jesus indicates that these powers must be recognized and confronted in our lives if we are to experience the gracious and stunning love of God. **Nibs Stroupe**

Jesus used another image of tying up the strong man in order to plunder his property. In using this parable, he speaks of the need of the gospel to expose our captivity to the "strong men" of our lives. In so doing, he seeks to free up our

imaginings, which have become the property of Satan. Our captivity to Satan must be exposed in order for us to begin to discover the glorious freedom of the children of God, as Paul puts it so powerfully in Romans 8:21.

How do we come to be captive to the powers and forces signified by the name "Satan"? In this passage Jesus names one central source of our captivity and demonstrates how deeply captive we are and how difficult this process of discovery is. Jesus' family comes to take him home because people are saying (and his family may also believe) that he is insane. **Nibs Stroupe**

At this point in the scene, a message is conveyed that Jesus' mother and brothers are outside. Jesus responded with a chilling rejection: they are not my family. Looking around him at the crowd of misfits, crazies, and his relentlessly undiscerning disciples he says, "This is my family."

It is easy to identify with the family and with the scribes. The "family values" agenda defends strong, traditional families and attributes their defense to a biblical perspective. It is also natural to identify with church authorities. If we are sitting on committees, choosing hymns, organizing Sunday school and potlucks we are part of the church authority. Christianity usually puts Christ at the base of these structures and uses his authority to bolster theirs. But this story demands a different perspective, because it is these very people that are condemned for failing to recognize who Jesus is.

These authorities are committed to maintaining domestic and religious life in the midst of troubled times. And yet from Jesus' perspective these familiar and essentially institutions are beyond the pale of his ministry. It is an odd feature of Jesus' ministry that he is open to everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick, working class, women, tax collectors, sexual outcasts. The only people who provoke Jesus' intolerance are his family and the normal, law-abiding scribes. The ones closest to him, his family and those who are—like him!—

dedicated to a life of piety, are those that are also farthest from him. They are least able to make the leap from dedication to religion to openhearted love of God's beloved, disfigured humanity. For these people, Jesus' disordered love of humanity feels like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolized by the demonic or insanity. They had difficulties telling madness and evil from the in breaking of the Holy Spirit.

Into our own time and society, instead of lepers and demoniacs crowding around Jesus, we might see the strange bodies of the disabled. We might see soldiers with three-fourths of their bodies burned from a fire in Iraq or other soldiers in prison reflecting on the horrors they witnessed and committed. We might see legless Afghan or Palestinian children. We might see a group of men reeking of cigarettes and coffee at an AA meeting. We might see a single mother with a baby on her hip or a gay couple holding hands or holding their adopted child. We might see scruffy members of a homeless community singing old-time hymns. When we think about who is near Jesus, it is not the morally perfect. It is just the diverse mess of humanity, with all of its moral, physical, spiritual beauty and imperfection. The only ones not in the picture, the ones not pressing in at the doors and windows, desperate and aching to be near Jesus, are the ones who think they know what religion and family life is supposed to look like. Jesus, infinitely patient with the crowd, blasts away at these people. Everyone will be forgiven, except people who blaspheme the Holy Spirit. The inability to tell the difference between the power of the Holy Spirit and the demonic is an *unforgivable sin*.

For most of us, this is pretty bad news. Like the Jews of the first century, we live in troubled times and try our best to figure out how to be faithful. The Holy Spirit is wild and disturbing and comes to us in unfamiliar forms. Is same-sex love a breeze from the Holy Spirit or a sign of a disintegrating society? Are feminine images of the divine crazy, demonic, or healing? What if we make the wrong

discernment? Perhaps if we pay attention to the theme of healing that runs through these stories, we might find a way to orient ourselves. It was the desire for healing that drew people to Jesus. Perhaps if we had compassion for our own wounds and the wounds of others, we might find ourselves in the crowd devoted to Jesus, instead of in the "legitimate" family that Jesus rejects. **Wendy Farley** We want to be part of the family doing the will of God!

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