

Misunderstandings

Mark 3:20-35

²⁰ And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." ²³ And he called them to him, and spoke 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 his end has come. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸ "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— ³⁰ for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." ³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Have you ever been misunderstood and accused of doing something for the wrong motives. Maybe you were trying to help someone in need and you were criticized as just wanting to be seen for your good works and praised. Maybe you assisted in a project and were accused of trying to take over. Maybe you spoke up for someone, but was accused of being bossy and wanting your own way. Maybe you were trying to help and were accused of being insensitive. Maybe you were just in the right place at the right time to make a difference and you were accused of being an opportunist. How did it make you feel when you were just trying to do the right thing for the right reason and although you did not do your actions for praise, what you got was criticism and ridicule? If so you may have an idea of what Jesus was experiencing in our scripture.

As background and a review from last Sunday's reading, we learned about Sabbath Living, that God wants us to be more concerned about people than rules. Jesus had been criticized because on a Sabbath afternoon his disciples had reached out and picked heads of grain to satisfy their hunger between meals. Then he healed a man with a disfigured hand on the Sabbath. Both of these angered the religious leaders and convinced them that Jesus was a law-breaker and therefore could not possibly be sent from God!

The setting for our consideration today is a house in which Jesus was attempting to eat dinner after a long day. There was a huge, frenzied crowd of Jews and Gentiles desperate to get close to the man reported to possess power over sickness and demons. Jesus' family was on the way to the house in order to bring him home because they were afraid he was mad, or in today's terms, he was having mental health issues. (We can understand their concerns. Just this week a handbag designer and a famous chef both committed suicide. Mental health issues are real and can be serious!) The scribes from Jerusalem were also after him, believing him to be in league with Satan. Jesus responded to their accusation with a series of short images. The first set was about something divided against itself cannot stand: a kingdom, a house, Satan himself. A second image, was about tying up a strong man in order to plunder his house. Jesus condemned his detractors in very strong terms. At that point, a message was conveyed that Jesus' mother and brothers were outside. Jesus responded with a chilling rejection: they were not his family. Looking around him at the crowd of misfits, persons with mental health challenges, and his relentlessly undiscerning disciples he said, "This is my family." (He claimed as family his disciples who almost always got it wrong, up to the last sentence when the women, who alone seemed to understand Jesus, run away in terror.)

It is easy for us 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 the scribes and modern day church authorities. If we work within the church or sit on a committee, choosing hymns, or organizing potlucks we are part of the church authority. We put Christ at the base of our structures and use his authority to do our ministry. But this story demands a different perspective, because it is these religious people that were condemned for failing to recognize who Jesus is.

It is disturbing to consider that these authorities are not evil. They are committed to maintaining domestic and religious life in the midst of troubled times. And yet from Jesus' perspective they were not supportive of his ministry. It is an odd feature of Jesus' ministry that he was open to everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the demented, the sick, working class, women, tax collectors, sexual outcasts. The only people who provoked Jesus' intolerance were his family and the normal, law-abiding scribes. The ones closest to him, his family and those who were—like him!—dedicated to a life of piety, were those that were also farthest from him. They were 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 felt like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolized by the demonic or insanity. For them it was difficult telling madness and evil from the in breaking of the Holy Spirit. The more healing Jesus did, the more hostility the healing generated, and Jesus became more and more angry and frustrated over this hostility.

If we transpose Jesus' followers into our own time, 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 lesbian mother with a baby on her hip and gay men holding hands or holding their adopted child. We might see scruffy members of Carriage Town Ministries 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, blasted 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*.

We learn some things about ourselves in this story and about Jesus. First we learn that we should be careful in stating what God will and will not do in our generation. It is easy to think that our way is the only way. The way we learned to do something is the way. We must be careful in condemning someone else's way of doing things.

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 rejected. **Wendy Farley**

Remember that it was not only the religious leaders that thought Jesus was demon possessed. His family was trying to intervene and accused Jesus of being demon possessed. Accusations that Jesus was not simply misguided, but under the power of the ruler of demons, conveyed something of the amazing impact of both rumors and true witnesses that spread around him. No wonder his family set out to get him under control, if not out of fear for his life, at least to remove their own embarrassment because of the rising public tumult. On the surface there is something harsh about Jesus' response to his family's request to reach out to him. This image of Jesus seeming to turn his back on his own mother and siblings simply does not fit with our pious picture of him. What is going on here? This was not the general attitude Jesus had toward family life. It clearly has to do with a Christian understanding of "family." The answer to Jesus' question, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ([v. 33](#)) is found in his saying, "whoever does the will of God" ([v. 35](#)). Thus even those who were not among the explicit disciples are indeed followers if they do what God wills. Whoever is "not against us is for us" ([9:40](#)); whoever receives a child in mercy welcomes Jesus ([9:37](#)); whoever prays with faith will be heard ([11:23](#)). These are the family of Jesus.

Regrettably our churches appear all too often to be divided houses, subject to powers of hostility, recrimination, and even enmity between groups. Communities so badly divided desperately need to find the source of wholeness. Jesus, the one who can exorcize the demonic, should be called upon to do his work of healing in our midst. Living out the form of discipleship Christ bids us follow means a new solidarity with all of humanity. It requires that we learn with him to weep with those who weep and to rejoice with those who rejoice. It asks us to live into the densities of human joy and suffering. It calls us to find ourselves precisely in our

willingness to give up our self-absorption. This is a demanding task, requiring a willingness to follow him into a new solidarity with God's whole family. Christ's love is stronger than the illusions and deceptions of evil—including our own needs to project onto others our own unresolved struggles with the demonic. Jesus comes to de-demonize us—to free us from both our inner and outer captivities! **Don E.**

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We too may be misunderstood for our deeds of ministry, but this does not give us a license to give up and go home. No, it puts us in the family of God and give us the power of the Holy Spirit to endure!

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