

Sermon on Mark 3:20-25
Second Sunday after Pentecost, June 7, 2015
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

Jesus: He's Out of His Mind

When you picture Jesus, what is the image that comes to mind? Maybe it's a gentle, good shepherd, cradling a lost sheep in his arms. More likely, it's the twisted figure of a man dying on a cross. Or perhaps it's a beloved teacher, surrounded by children, laying his hands on people to heal them. It could be you even picture an angry Jesus, throwing tables over and snapping a whip, driving money changers out of the Temple. What is your image of Jesus?

Most of the time we think of Jesus as gentle, soft-spoken and kind, like a favorite uncle or Sunday School teacher, because that is what we learned in Church as a child. I don't think I've ever seen a picture of Jesus with an angry face, or disturbed, challenging his adversaries with harsh words. We prefer the gentle Jesus, meek and mild, who doesn't make trouble, who doesn't deserve the resistance that he received, and certainly not the betrayal and execution that were to come.

But in the gospel of Mark we hear of a Jesus who is strong and vital, who challenged his adversaries, and sometimes had harsh words for those who oppressed the poor, put obstacles in the way of faith, or portrayed God as a condemning judge without compassion. You would think that Jesus would be a hero, for all the miracles of healing that he performed, and for casting out demons from those possessed, and for making the lame to walk. But in the third chapter of Mark, Jesus was already experiencing opposition from those who were jealous of the crowds who were following him. The Pharisees were disturbed by Jesus and his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath to eat, for this was "work" and against the law. Jesus said that the Sabbath was made for humankind, not the other way around. The chapter begins with Jesus entering a synagogue, where a man with a withered hand sat, and the Pharisees watched to see if he would cure him on the Sabbath, so that they might accuse him. When Jesus asked if it were lawful to heal on the Sabbath, they were silent. Jesus looked on them with anger, and healed the man's withered hand. So his enemies left the synagogue to conspire against him.

Today's lesson begins with Jesus going home, to the same village where his family lived. By now everyone had heard of Jesus, so when they gathered it became so crowded they couldn't even eat. There was a buzz going around about Jesus, and it wasn't complimentary. Jesus didn't come home to a hero's welcome, but rather, to a town full of gossip about the trouble that Jesus was in. So I have a multiple choice test for you about who said what about Jesus.

So, take your pick: who said this about Jesus: “*He’s out of his mind?*” A) The unclean spirits; B) The scribes; C) The People of Nazareth, his home town; or D) His family. Correct answer is “C – the people of Nazareth. And who wanted to put Jesus in restraints because of all the commotion he was causing? A) – the High Priests; B) King Herod; C) His family; D) All of the above? C is correct. The shocking thing to us is that his own family, including his mother, the Virgin Mary, and his brothers, appeared to have wanted to restrain and bind him, for his own good, because of what he was saying. For word had gotten around so fast about Jesus that his family came out with restraints to shackle his body, to say he was crazy, and so get him out of harm’s way. For his words and actions were putting himself and his followers (maybe even his family) in danger.

Then the scribes who had come down from Jerusalem accused him: “he has Beelzebul” – meaning, he was possessed by the lord of demons himself. (Actually, Baalzebul was a Canaanite name meaning “Baal the prince” – one of the gods who rivaled the God of Israel in the Old Testament, which literally means “lord of the flies”.) The name had become by Jesus’ time a synonym for the leader of the evil forces. But Jesus called out the scribes and the people, asking “Can Satan cast out Satan? *If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.*”

Truer words were never spoken. Jesus made too much sense, and the crowd began to listen to him more closely. But his mother and his brothers were still worried, and asked for him to come outside. Their message came to Jesus as he was teaching, “Your mother and your brothers are outside, asking for you.” A good son would stop what he was doing, and come out to meet them, I guess.

But Jesus said, “*Who are my mother and my brothers?*” *And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”* So much for Jesus and family values!!! So soon after Mother’s Day, during these days of graduations and family reunions, so soon before Father’s Day – how can the Church abide Jesus disavowing his family? That meek and mild, gentle Jesus – what happened to him? Something has been lost in the translation over the centuries, because when Jesus was preaching and teaching, doing God’s work, he wasn’t seen as meek and mild by his adversaries, his disciples, or even by his own flesh and blood! And Jesus transformed what we would call “Christian family values” by making each one of us his brothers and sisters, like him, all children of God! The main criteria to be one of Jesus’ family was not to be related by “blood” or by family name (which would be impossible for any of us today!) – but *faith, and the doing of God’s will!* That changes everything, doesn’t it, brothers and sisters? Because now, not only are we related to Jesus by faith, but we are also

connected – related, even – by faith to one another, and to all people throughout the world! Don't take it from me – for Jesus himself said it!

Maybe Jesus is redefining what “family” really means – to say it's not just about flesh and blood, or who is legally related to whom by law! Maybe “family” goes much deeper - and wider – than that! It is commonly the case that what God intends, and what Jesus teaches, has a depth and breadth that we cannot even comprehend! So, being part of Jesus' family, or the “family of God”, really means that we are connected much more deeply than we suspect, and with many more people than we would ever imagine – or even want to be connected to! And being in family - being connected – means we have responsibility for one another – sometimes to say things that are uncomfortable, even offensive or challenging, because they are true. Just like Jesus did.

And to say these things out of love, not to disown, or show superiority, but to reconcile and bring us closer together! Sometimes the greatest act of love that we can do for another person is to speak, out of love, to challenge or “agitate” that person, to intervene when they are going in a direction that will lead to destruction – like taking the cell phone from a person so that they don't text while driving (for example). Our responsibility to speak difficult truths to one another comes when people we love act or speak in ways that harm others, or harms themselves, such as when we belittle one another, call each other names, spread stereotypes about others, or exclude people of whom we don't approve. This is needed both in the community and in the Church, not just in families, as when the truth about domestic violence or sexual abuse has to be spoken – even when it seems like it may tear our churches, communities or families apart – because the truth is, keeping such offenses quiet or secret can lead to even more damage, or for abuse to continue for generations. Just ask the Archdiocese – or any church shattered by sexual abuse.

Now, family intervention may be necessary when someone's addiction is spiraling out of control, Ironically, Jesus' family thought they would intervene for him when his words and actions in the local synagogue were getting him in so much trouble and making people angry in first century Palestine! But actually, Jesus was doing an intervention on his own family, on his own people, on the whole human race, which has misunderstood the call of God for all of us to have faith in God, love for one another, and hope the future. For we have misconstrued God's commandments, which show us how to live in community together, and made them a litmus test for who is worthy to be saved, who may enter God's house, or come to Christ's table. We have misunderstood God's preference to always have mercy on those who have fallen short, into judgment and condemnation for those who break the rules. Little wonder that millennials now post blogs which ask “Why are Christians so judgmental”, as if “being judgmental” is a synonym for

being “Christian”! This is not just happening today – it’s the same thing people were experiencing in the first century when Jesus walked the earth, when Pharisees and scribes interpreted God’s Law for the people, and turned God’s Word into a long list of commandments, laws and ordinances that no person could ever hope to fulfill!

So in this era when “family values” has become more of a lightning rod for division than a common understanding in our world, perhaps it is time for us to pay more attention to Jesus’ plea. Just imagine if we treated all human beings as brothers and sisters in one human family, instead of insiders and outsiders who either belong to us or don’t belong? What if you and I considered every child of God our brother or our sister? Jesus did! He didn’t stop having compassion just because someone was from another religion or ethnic group! Jesus had conversations with Samaritans, female as well as male, and healed those who were sick, even when they were Syro-Phoenicians or Canaanites – and not Jewish, as his relatives were! Scripture says that God has compassion on whomever God wishes to have compassion, and we see this time and time again with Jesus.

So why can’t you and I consider people who are different than us our brothers and sisters, break bread together with Muslims, worship with Jews, Roman Catholics, or even Missouri Synod Lutherans? The objection that says “they are not my blood, they are not my kind, they don’t believe as I do” has to be set aside, if we are to walk where Jesus walked! I know, it’s not an easy thing to do, because we think our divisions give us status. We can’t let go of them by ourselves – we will need a lot of faith, and God’s help to do it! But Jesus spoke openly about the divisions in peoples’ lives, to bring God’s truth to the lies that caused them, in order to bring reconciliation, healing, and new life! Who is “out of their mind”? Is it Jesus, or is it us? I think we know the answer to that!

So may our prayer today be that we may be filled with the power of God’s love through the Holy Spirit, so that we may set aside our differences between others in our human race, and not only celebrate them, but see even our enemies as sisters and brothers. May God help us to imitate our Lord Jesus, who once walked this earth as a Jew, who calls you and me – and all the world - members of his own family, his own kin, through faith in God and love for one another. Thanks be to God for offering us this most marvelous, life-giving gift! Amen.