

Rev. Timothy M. Crummitt

Third Sunday after Pentecost - Year B

St. Paul's Lutheran Church

Genesis 3:8-15

Psalm 130

II Corinthians 4:13—5:1

Mark 3:20-35

06/09/2024

Gospel

The Holy Gospel according to St. Mark:

[Jesus went home;] 20and the crowd came together again, so that [Jesus and the disciples] could not even eat. 21When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” 22And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” 23And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? 24If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27But 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; 29but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—30for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.” 31Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your

mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” 33And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” 34And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! 35Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”
The Gospel of our Lord

Prayer

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Divided

Good morning! I grew up in a house with a brother and a sister. My dad was an only child, and the cousins on my mom’s side of the family moved away when I was young. This meant that family gatherings were rather small. Then, one December while I was dating Megan I was invited to attend her aunt's Christmas party. “Sure!” I thought, “I’m a people person, this should be great!” Boy was I in for a surprise...

Megan’s family on both sides come from a long line of faithful Catholics... which means there was a lot of them. This Christmas party was Megan’s father’s side of the family, and he was one of eight. My first shock came when I entered the door and was greeted by Megan’s grandfather who basically set up camp at the front door, giving everyone a hug and an envelope filled with cash as they came through the door. It was his station for the whole day and it required his full attention. Until that day, I had not realized that it was possible to fit 25 people in a living room of that size, or the fact that even with that number, people would still need to be in other rooms. I was overwhelmed to say the least. It’s bad when an extrovert needs to take a break outside.

Family is very important. But it was arguably even more essential in the First Century. Family was literally the foundation of society. While we can always find exceptions, there are a few key things that we can say about the family structure of the 1st century. The word “family” could also be translated as “clan,” and it would probably be better to think of it this way too. The survival of most families revolved around a common industry or profession. And tasks were assigned along mostly strict gender expectations. The clan revolved around the firstborn son, and so the lineage followed these “traditional” pathways. Second born sons would often be sent to other clans or tribes to find a wife, like in the case of Jacob. The physical home was set up in a similar pattern. One scholar writes that *“the typical Israelite dwelling is known as a ‘four-room house.’ Small columns divided the space into four areas, and also supported a structure of two to three stories high. Archaeological remains indicate that these homes were designed especially for agricultural households, with small livestock inhabiting the central floor and the upper floor(s) reserved for sleeping. Each house could serve as a residence for a nuclear family and those directly attached to them. Several of these four-room houses would be conjoined, sharing a common courtyard and walls.”*¹

The structure literally provided the basis of a sort of organized political, economical, and religious system. This would have been especially prominent in smaller and rural communities. Clans could grow into large enough communities that they constituted as small towns or villages. Even larger cities might be made up of several different clans that had banded together.

¹ Willis, Timothy M. “Family.” Pp. 427-430 of *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible. Vol. II. Edited by Katharine Doob Sakenfeld. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009.*

So put yourself in the shoes of the community in Nazareth in Galilee. Your distant cousin Jesus, who if we're honest, was always a little different, shows up in town with a literal small army of followers. He used to do carpentry like his father Joseph, but had given it up to become a rabbi. Not only are things crazy enough with the large crowd, but some scribes from the literal biggest city you could think of, Jerusalem, had shown up and started going around telling people that he was possessed by demons. So you and your family decide to go put this whole thing to bed before it gets any worse and then he has the audacity to go and say that none of you were his REAL FAMILY?! The nerve of this guy!

I'll be honest, when I read this text on Monday, I was ready to preach on something else. C Clifton Black, a professor of Biblical Theology at Princeton said that "*this Markan sandwich leaves a vinegary aftertaste.*"² But the more I dove in, the more I have enjoyed it. We have two central systems at work in the story, and they put Jesus between a rock and a hard place. The scribes represent the religious authorities that had a central role in more than just religious matters. They served as lawyers and legal experts too. The other was the family, which we have already discussed. And in the middle of all of this, Jesus has somehow made both groups angry.

In response, Jesus does some pretty cool stuff. The first is that he calls his detractors to him. He doesn't make rude comments behind their backs, but instead invites them to come understand. He leans into, rather than running away or avoiding. It's Jesus, so instead of answering things simply he responds with a parable. The Hebrew word "*meshalim*" for

²<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-10-2/commentary-on-mark-320-35-5>

parables literally means “shadowy things,”³ which I think we can all agree certainly seems to fit a lot of Jesus’ explanations.

His point is that a house divided cannot stand. Jesus seems to be also suggesting that he has the power to defeat Satan because, as the parable suggests, he has already gone and tied up the “strong man” that is Satan. Jesus has the power to do these miraculous things because on some level, Satan has been subdued.

The reference to the unforgivable sin was puzzling for me, and I’ll leave it to C. Clifton to offer up an explanation: *“Though all other sins are forgivable, aligning Jesus with demonic forces is a sin that cannot be released (Mark 3:28–30). Why? Mark does not explain. It’s a parable. Here’s my take: Identifying as diabolical the one endowed with God’s holy spirit (1:8, 10) is a peculiar blasphemy, beyond the pale of remission, because one thereby drives oneself away from the true agent of forgiveness (2:5, 10; compare “the deathward sin” in 1 John 5:16–17)... To team Jesus with Satan is so utterly perverse that its proponents put themselves under conditions in which forgiveness is a practical impossibility.”*⁴

Which brings us back to family. While at first it might seem like Jesus is tearing down the institution, when we take a closer look you can see that he is, in fact, expanding upon our understanding of what the term means. This would have been especially important for the early church which often saw Christian believers ostracized by family members that were non-believers. But Jesus takes it further, one detail that’s easy to miss is found in the last verse of our reading. Throughout the whole passage we

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

have heard references to Jesus' brothers and mother, but in verse 35 Jesus says that "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." The text explicitly says sister. Jesus expands the circle of care to include those that often have gone excluded.

In the end, the church is a lot like Jesus' family. We want God to work in our traditional box of understanding. To fit the role that we have come to expect. When challenged, we become offended, rather than allowing God to open our eyes to new possibilities. But the good news is that God is patient. We can look again, this time maybe seeing something wholly different and groundbreaking. Amen.