

Mark 3:20-35

And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, 'He has gone out of his mind.' And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, 'He has Beelzebub, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.' And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, 'How 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. 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.

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

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, 'Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.' And he replied, '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.'

The passage sounds strange to modern and even postmodern ears.

Beelzebub? (lord of the flies) Satan? Demons? What?

Thomas James believes Jesus takes the realities of Satan and other demonic powers seriously. Did Jesus believe that a personality named Satan actually existed? Probably. This is a demonic power that is actively working against the compassionate and reconciling love of God. This is the reality that Jesus names here, and whether we believe in a 'being' named Satan- it's not as important as hearing our infatuation with the powers of evil of Satan's Powers that continues to win us over.

Said this way, the reality of Satan and Beelzebub becomes clear. They name the forces and orders of power that capture us -to hurt us, hurt others, and to hurt God. The power of race, because of skin colour or cultural heritage -especially apparent today. Patriarchy, which tells us men should dominate women. Materialism- the lure of shiny things that shout at us money gives us life! Militarism says weapons and war (often in the name of God), bring peace and security.

In these verses from Mark, Jesus points out that the power of these things must be recognized and confronted in our lives if we want to experience the gracious and amazing love of God.

Jesus uses the metaphor, ‘tying up the strong man in order to vandalize his property.’ In this parable he speaks of the need of the gospel to expose our captivity/lure to the ‘strong men’ in our lives. (mentioned - materials, military, pride, jealousy, etc). By doing this, he seeks to free our imaginations that have become the property of Satan. Our allegiance to Satan has to be exposed so we can begin to discover the glorious freedom of the children of God. (*as Paul writes in Romans 8:21.*)

How did we get caught up in the powers and forces signified by the name “Satan”? In this passage Jesus names one central source of our captivity and shows us how deeply absorbed we are and how hard the process of awareness is.

The story goes... there was a day when Jesus was heard saying, “Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God” (*v.33-35*)
A confusing statement.

The reading from Mark 3 offers a story of people in a community who believed Jesus was crazy. Verse 19 tells us Jesus has returned, only to have the crowd swarm all around him. In fact, there were so many people Jesus and the disciples couldn’t even find a place to eat. Jesus’ family came to get him; they had heard people saying, “He’s out of his mind.”

In fact, Jesus is so far gone out of his mind (?) scribes have come all the way from Jerusalem to have their say. They’ve walked nearly 100 miles to speak their minds about this roaming rabbi in the region of Galilee. They say, “He has ‘Beelzebub’ (a demonic god from the Canaanite region) who is giving him the power of demons to cast out demons from others.” (A few verses earlier, Jesus did show authority over unclean spirits.)

The crowd believes Jesus must be possessed with a demon himself because he’s exerting authority over demons. They don’t think he’s just out of his mind –they think he’s become the devil incarnate.

But Jesus speaks for himself, giving his response in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, the kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, the 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.” (*v. 24-26*)

Jesus is basically saying, “If I were Satan, why would I cast out demons? Wouldn’t I let them go on with their demonic intentions? If I were Satan, why would I act against myself?”

When Jesus says Satan, he's not necessarily talking about a red-caped, pronged tail, horned fiery being, an image our modern culture has adapted from the book of Revelation. (A scripture of dreams and symbolism written by John -thought to be a disciple - approximately 81-96 CE)

Thomas Janes says,

“These demonic powers ‘name the forces and configurations of power that capture us and cause us to hurt ourselves, hurt others, and to hurt God.’”

That which has us in its grasp.

Jesus isn't casting out demons and unclean spirits because he agrees with them and just wants to be a more powerful version of such satanic happenings. He's casting them out because he stands fiercely opposed to such things. Not only does Jesus stand solidly opposed to such demonic perspectives, he offers one of the most troubling statements in all the Bible.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin, for he has an unclean spirit.” (3:28-30)

This is a terrifying claim by Christ. If what Jesus says is true, and who are we to say that what Jesus is saying isn't true, then it's possible we can do something so wicked that no amount of repentance and seeking forgiveness will bring us mercy. A sobering thought.

It seems what Jesus is criticizing- is not simple wrongdoings, naive miss-speakings and mistakes- these he says are forgivable. Things that are *not* forgivable are blasphemy against God and the Holy Spirit. In Mark 3, Jesus says blasphemy against the Holy Spirit ...is blaming the Holy Spirit for evil.

Scribes have come to Jesus to say that the work he has been doing, casting out unclean spirits and demons, is indeed the work of evil. These who have falsely accused Jesus of devilish acts, have committed an unforgivable sin in that they have not only failed to see the good God has done, but they have blamed the good works of God on the evil one. This is a serious indictment.

It's concerning to know that these leaders in the church were the ones being accused of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit.... they were trying to say their understanding of how God works -didn't fit into what they saw happening. Do we do this? Yes. It's hard not to when we all have our own understanding of God.

What fits and what doesn't. It shouldn't be so, but because we're human, it is so. Instead of allowing themselves to be transformed and enlightened by God's work, they say the work of the Spirit is evil. The result is that Christ calls (and the only time Christ calls their actions) –unforgivable.

A sharp condemnation against the leaders of the Synagogue.

Jesus is in the middle of a large crowd, and his mother and brothers have come to take him home. Maybe they half believe what is being said about him. He's standing in a doorway when they call to him. It was either so packed with people, or maybe just so noisy Jesus couldn't hear his family calling him. People near Christ say to him, "Your mother and brothers and sisters(?) are outside asking for you." In response, Jesus says what no mother ever wants to hear, "Who are my mother and brothers? Whoever does the will of God." Knife meet heart.

Can you imagine your four year old child saying this to you? The child who doesn't know the unfairness of such psychological warfare yet- yelling, "You're not my mom" ...is vastly different from having your 30 year old son say it. Can you imagine the pain Jesus' mother must have felt? Even if Jesus' denying his mother's presence was meant as a way to establish a more well-connected community -willing to be a 'new family', his actions have hurt his mother deeply. When we read this quickly, it seems Jesus is challenging the role of our blood relatives in our lives.

This isn't the only time Jesus causes apprehension in his family. When he was twelve, he dismisses his parent's anxiety about his disappearance for three days -with a typical teenager's response, "Why were you looking for me, you knew where I'd be.... jeesh."

Early in his ministry he is annoyed when his mother urges him to take care of the wine situation at the wedding in Cana. And in Luke 12, he makes it clear that he came to bring division, not peace, as everybody thought. Division? In his response to his family's request to see him, in this passage from Mark he is reminding them/us that those who take care of us, love us, and nurture us, also help bind us to Satan. Pain.

Jesus' departure from his family is the same challenging conviction he offers the scribes. We believe our Ancient God is working in the world as mandatory—our parents and churches give us no choice. In doing so, we forget, don't recognize, or maybe don't want recognize, the Spirit is working today in other voices, other faces, other places, other identities, and other communities where we previously have been unwilling or unable to see God at work.

In the middle of this challenging viewpoint, one that calls us to consider our own practices and prejudices, I'm not sure Jesus is being 'anti-family.' He's not really speaking badly of his mother, his brothers, or his sisters. Three years later, on the cross, Jesus calls out to John to take care of his mother, Mary. Jesus does care about his family.

But if we allow ourselves to see God working in new ways, Jesus is challenging our understanding of family. He says "Here are my mothers and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and my sister, and my mother. Insiders and outsiders are now defined, not by blood, but by the commitment to doing God's will." (v. 34,35) But can't we have both?

We are called to be a community. Our call as a congregation, our call as a faith community is not to be each other's neighbours (as we often sing) - our call is to be a family. When we're going out for dinner and we ask, "Is Sharon coming too?" Response- "Yes, she's family." We're not just to share our love with one another, we are to share in life with each other. Our call is to know each other, to live with one another, to celebrate each other's celebrations, and to mourn each other's losses. And to do the work of God.

We have heard this so many times, but are we divided too... sometimes, somehow? Having different opinions is healthy (in families as well as churches), but what if we have a huge disagreement?

You may have heard me use this example a number of times.

In the early 80's, our church voted to allow the ordination of homosexual and lesbian persons into ministry. (It was not unanimous.) There was much pain, and the church divided. Some faith communities believed the word of God was calling them to welcome people of all sexual orientations into the family of The United Church of Canada.

And while after much prayer and discussion and more prayer, others decided to leave the church and find other places to worship as they felt called. A few people came back to our congregations, others have stayed away. This has, and continues, to cause pain and heartache for many people. What was God asking them/us to do?

As the body of Christ, as a congregation of faith, a family of faith, we are mothers, brothers, fathers, and sisters, children of God sharing in the life of Christ together. Whoever does the will of God.

Satan cannot win.

But a house divided against itself will fall.

God said so.

