

Mark 3: 20-35 “Divided House” Rev. Janet Chapman 6/10/18

A couple was being questioned about the way they had completed their tax form during an audit. They were asked why they had failed to answer who was the head of the household. Their answer was simple: “We have been arguing over the answer to that question for 17 years. As soon as we agree, we’ll let you know.” Family dynamics can be complicated. If we had any doubts about that, we are given today’s story where the son is at odds with his parent and siblings and the answer to the problem is complicated. Verse 20 starts off abrupt, so we need a little context for our story. Jesus has just called his disciples, the last one being Judas, whom Mark takes special care to remind us that he is the controversial betrayer. Now Jesus heads for a brief stint at home, where his family resides. Our experiences with home and family immediately shape our expectations as to how this visit will unfold. Robert Frost summed it up well: “Home is the place where when you arrive, they have to take you in.” But the cast of characters and the narrator apparently didn’t read Frost. As the text notes, the crowd is so huge, they couldn’t even eat a home-cooked meal. Mark places this undertone of deep hunger within the confusion and tension that is about to follow. Imagine the NBA Finals coming down to a 7th game on home court, being played when the Warriors actually have some competition to worry about, and it is general seating only, first come, first serve. The crowd is excited, pushy, and scrambling to get the best view. Although it is still early in his ministry, Jesus’ controversial ability to draw a crowd revolves around his proclaiming the realm of God is near, his healing people, even on the sabbath, and his stumping the religious authorities. It appears that some secret power breathes from within Jesus that only the demonic forces recognize and therefore they are the ones to call him the Son of God. He mysteriously skirts along border regions and escapes to the mountains to train his new disciples. This behavior prompts

suspicion and anxiety among everyone, so somebody has to step in and restore order. Who better to do that than one's own family? Out of love, frustration, and maybe even some embarrassment, his family seeks to take control. "He's just out of his mind, you know, all the pressure and such, don't pay him any mind," they say. The family is ready to restrain him if need be, to keep the peace. The word "restrain" is the same verb used to describe those who lay hands on Jesus to arrest him. Mother Mary and the siblings are staging a family intervention in an effort to save his life, or maybe redirect his goals. Only Mark dares to pull back the curtain on these family dynamics, whereas Matthew and Luke take a gentler approach. Sometimes too much information is not a good thing, sort of like when the report leaked out about Kate Spade's comment to her daughter before her suicide.

Family laundry is private, but Mark chooses to leak the information because his gospel, as Ched Myers states, is a manifesto for radical discipleship. From the very first line, Mark's strategy is subversive, as he uplifts this new realm of God's which undermines the powerful, which binds up the strong ones who rule with heavy hands and stone-cold hearts, and cuts down the establishment to liberate the oppressed and the poor. It is meant to help imperial subjects, those sunk deep in Caesar's snare, learn the truth about their world and themselves – what Jesus is saying and doing is shocking and some folks will be offended. Those who dare to accept this new realm, those who repent of their pursuit of power and wealth, will be labelled insane, out of their mind, by even their own family members. This new realm of God will displace the realm of Caesar, a culture of materialism and status, and such values do not get replaced easily, even between family members. That is exactly what happened in the early church – relatives abandoned the "crazy Jesus freaks," even if they were kin, because of the

radical and subversive message Jesus taught. With good intentions at heart, families tried to restrain what they didn't understand. This may sound all too familiar as such dynamics still play out today. We often call ourselves the family of God here; we talk about being more than just acquaintances who see each other on Sunday mornings – we are brothers and sisters who dedicate ourselves to looking out for each other's best interests. Then new understandings begin to filter into the family dynamics which cause disagreements – who is the head of the household, how can women be elders let alone ministers, what or who are we being saved from, who is welcome at the table? There are those who speak up within the family about a radical vision of church which is more action-oriented and less talk-oriented. A lone wolf ponders what would it mean to focus on the realm of God being at hand here and now thus our top priority needs to be practicing Jesus' ways above all else. Thus previous interpretations of Paul's words and other New Testament authors about Jesus being a sacrifice for our sins seem to contradict what Jesus says about his purpose, that is to proclaim the presence of the realm of God. How do the two coexist if at all? Suddenly we are being asked to read these New Testament authors first and foremost through the lens of Jesus' life and ministry, which believe it or not, the universal church has been reluctant to do for centuries. Some of our family started doing this under the guidance of folks like Steve Kindle and Ellis Martin. And some of us began to worry, not just here, but probably more so outside these walls saying, "That's not how it's done – we're your family in Christ, we know what's best and we will persuade you otherwise! The pressure is just getting to you, you aren't in your right mind, so we will use the influence we have to make sure you don't get out of control." If one listens closely, you can hear the fear in the voices as some try to defend what we have always believed – only some

people are God's people, there are limits to God's love, the universe is a bad place and the best we can do is tolerate it until we get to heaven, the well-off are being rewarded by God and the destitute are being punished. These are the truths from the legal experts in the family who say to the questioners, "You are demon possessed. You are destroying our foundations. Be quiet." But Jesus says, if that were the case, this family would not survive; a house divided against itself cannot stand. We have seen instead that families adjust and transform over time; they lean not upon their own understandings but upon new revelations which speak through Jesus' life. Even Paul did that as he states in 1 Corinthians 3, "I laid a foundation like a wise master builder according to God's grace that was given to me, but someone else is building on top of it. Each person needs to pay attention to the way they build on it. No one can lay any other foundation besides the one that is already laid, which is Jesus Christ."

A certain young woman applied to graduate school at a veterinary school having grown up on a farm with a true love for horses. She'd learned the difference between Appaloosa and Andalusian when most children her age were distinguishing household pets. Her church family pretended not to notice when she tracked mud in from her riding boots on Sunday mornings or she read a horse magazine behind her Bible in Sunday School. She had a way with animals, that touch, that whisper, that look. But the director of admissions sat opposite her and said, "That's not how we do it here. You would be better off to pursue another career." She was devastated and left the office in tears. Upon learning of the rejection, her church family didn't gloss over the reality but instead reminded her of how many times they'd seen her fall off her horse only to get back up again. They kept their faith in her and reassured her she wasn't crazy to keep at her developing vision for her life. It wasn't long before she was graduating from that very same

veterinary school at the top of her class. She secured a post-doc surgical residency at an Ivy League university and her church family jokingly whispered to her, “So do you think you might be best served by considering a different career path?” Her church family loves to tell this story because, even when her path was unclear, they had the courage in themselves to maintain their faith in her. Even now, they love to see her galloping ahead, moving unrestrained into her new reality. They remind us that being the church means not dividing the family, but helping its members grow stronger through new understandings, new visions and dreams of what God’s realm can be here and now. It means not only building on a firm foundation, but moving forward into uncharted waters, challenging deserts, and wilderness territories to discover what God can and will do. Most of all, it means, looking at those who are sitting around you and saying, “Here are my mother and my siblings! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister, mother and father.” May such a house stand true within God’s realm.