

1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)

Psalm 138

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Has anybody in your family ever told you that you were 'crazy'? It's not unusual. When those who have lived with us, shared in our upbringing and have biological connections to us don't see the world the same way we do...we look 'crazy' to them. They might actually be worried about decisions we are making or things that we are doing. Perhaps they think we are taking too big a risk in some area of our lives. Or perhaps we've been exposed to some aspects of the world that they haven't been exposed to, so their outlook is a bit different. Differences of opinion happen in every family. So how are we to know? If we come to a different conclusion about God and Jesus and faith than they do, who are we to say that we are right and they are wrong? It's usually not a clear and easy decision to make. We just need to proceed in the way we see fit.

And Jesus has warned us that being a disciple of his will cause problems in our lives. It's dangerous to try to be a disciple of Jesus. It can put us in conflict with people that we dearly love and respect as we discover that we have different understandings of Jesus and different concepts of God. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus warns that he has not come to bring peace to the earth. He has come to bring fire! He tells us that he has come to bring division and that members of households will be divided among themselves. (Luke 12:49-53). This Christianity business is neither safe nor peaceful.

So how do we know which way to go? How can we tell from what Jesus says and does how we are to be good disciples. It's not always easy. The passage from the Gospel of Mark that we just heard contains easily four different sermons. Perhaps more. There is the notion of whether or not there is a Satan or a Devil moving in the world...not the one in a red leotard with horns and a pitchfork, but a force that works against the love of God. And there's the parable about tying up the owner of the house so the house can be plundered. And the action that is unforgivable according to Jesus. And the message about what constitutes 'family' for each of us. These concepts are all intertwined.

Each of the Gospels that tell us about Jesus have a slightly different perspective. Together they can give us a rather 3-dimensional view of Jesus, his ministry, and his message. During the entire season of Easter we have been hearing from the Gospel according to John. That gospel tends to emphasize the divinity of Jesus...his oneness with God. The gospel of Mark tends to be a bit more edgy because it tells us about all the conflicts that Jesus either encountered or provoked in order to get his message across. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, we can empathize with the befuddled disciples as they seem to misunderstand Jesus on a regular basis. They remind us of us! It's not always so easy to figure out Jesus' message. For the next eleven

weeks, we're going to be hearing from the Gospel of Mark, so the information that we get about Jesus will be just a bit more dramatic and conflictual than we hear in the other gospels.

Today's lesson is just such an example. We are in the third chapter of Mark and for the first two chapters, Mark has been telling us (at a breakneck pace!) about the person and ministry of Jesus. In just those scant two chapters, Jesus has been baptized and confirmed by God as his Son; he has spent 40 days in the wilderness wrestling with Satan and he has come out of it as the victor; he has cast out a demon in a man in the synagogue; he has healed the infirm including the lepers and Peter's mother-in-law; he has healed a man by forgiving his sins which is blasphemous to the local religious leaders; he has called a tax collector to be an apostle and has openly fraternized and broken bread with blatant sinners which doesn't go unnoticed by the scribes; his disciples don't fast; and he has cured a man with a withered hand in the synagogue on the Sabbath. Word of Jesus has spread like wildfire and the people are showing up in droves to be healed by him. They crowd in on him so closely that he can't even eat a meal. Both the witness to these events and the rumors about them are causing tremendous concern to both the local religious establishment and to his family.

Worried about his safety, his family tries desperately to intervene. They want to rescue him not only from the crowds that are pressing in around him continuously, but from the religious leaders who are already plotting to destroy him. Jesus is in trouble! The family to the rescue. Word comes to them that Jesus is 'crazy' and they may have believed it as well. Or they may have wanted him out of the public eye not only to protect him, but to ease their own embarrassment and bewilderment. The scribes have upped the ante in their accusations against him. Not only do they believe him to be blasphemous, now they accuse him of being possessed by the Satan himself. And who in their right mind could blame them?

Jesus himself calls the bet. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" And then he adds, "A house divided against itself cannot stand." A divided house is doomed to fail, so if Satan is casting out Satan, then Satan is doomed to fail. And then comes the pronouncement of the unforgiveable sin: "Whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never be forgiven, but is guilty of an eternal sin." This is one of the few times that Jesus answers accusations from religious authority directly instead of asking another question. If the answer to the question is 'no', then they have no case against Jesus. If it is 'yes' then Jesus will fail. Jesus' description of the unforgiveable sin in the denial of the Holy Spirit is focused on a denial of Jesus' work of healing and releasing people from captivity is from God. So Jesus' accusation to them further inflames the situation.

The crowd must be beginning to worry about Jesus' welfare as well. They point out to him that his mother and his brothers are calling for him. Jesus answers them, as well. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And he answers that rhetorical question himself by simply saying "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Jesus is not anti-family. One of his very last acts from the cross was to commend his mother to John's care so that he would be her family after Jesus died. Jesus is not against biological family. He is not disowning them. He's telling us that we need to listen to our own hearts, our own

answers to prayer, to read scripture diligently and to talk to others who follow Jesus faithfully in order to be able to discern what it is that Jesus is asking us to do in any given situation. We can't follow Jesus Christ alone. Jesus made that perfectly clear. We can't be without spiritual family...the ones who listen to us, who provide support for us, who struggle with us to understand the Word of the Lord, who help us make decisions, and who offer us the occasional rebuke when we get off track. These are the people who are our family...the ones who are actively and consciously and purposefully trying to do the will of God.

It is so easy to get off track. All of us are captives of our culture, our upbringing, our traditions, the ideologies that we grew-up with and the opinions that surround us. Think about how captive we are to notions of race or ethnicity; think about how captive we are to the notion that money is life-giving; think about how captive we are to the power of patriarchy; think about how captive we are to the idea that war and weapons will keep us safe. These ideas were not taught to us by bad people. They were taught to us by good and loving people in our families who were taking care of us and passing on their own traditions. We were being taught a certain perspective. And Jesus challenges us to examine these perspectives very carefully to see if they align with what he teaches and what he asks us to do.

At some point, we must decide whether or not we see these ideologies as supporting our discipleship of Christ or as hindrances. Do these ideas promote the love and care for all human beings the way Jesus taught us or do they stop us from becoming true disciples? The trick for us when we disagree with them is to make our own decisions about our own lives and remain connected to those we love who are making different choices. Differences of opinion do not mean division. And when they threaten to divide, Jesus is the source of all resolution for each of us. In moments of division, it is Jesus who will heal and make us whole...including our families that seem divided.

If you have choices and decisions to make in your life, there's a litmus test for that...and no one says it better than our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry...

If it's not about love, it's not about God!!

Thanks be to God!

AMEN.