

What a terrible name we have for this season we've just begun: Ordinary Time. Many churches call this the Time after Pentecost - not much better than Ordinary Time if you ask me. Whatever we call it, we've taken our first steps into this poorly named liturgical season.

This is the 2nd Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time. Holy Trinity Sunday last week was our first step into this season - and it's an important one. Having encountered the Spirit in wind, flame and tongues of fire, we ask the question, "How does this Holy Spirit fit with Jesus and God? Who's the boss?" And Holy Trinity Sunday gives us a great mystery to ponder, as with the generations who've come before us - the truth of God's Oneness in three persons: The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

What lies in the midst of this mystery though is simpler than we might expect it to be: The truth that at the center of God's Being is relationship. The Church's understanding of how these three persons interact and share identity is centered on this most fundamental thing: Relationship. Holy Trinity Sunday is the church's reminder that we worship a God who is, wants and creates life-giving relationship.

It strikes me as strange then, that we encounter these texts one Sunday later. They seem to center division; between the Scribes and Jesus, between Jesus and his family, kingdoms and houses. Between Adam and Eve, between them and God, them and the garden. The Psalmist decries that distance as depths. Paul speaks to the distance the Corinthians experience between the promises of God and their current suffering. Division, everywhere in these readings, feels intractably familiar to me. From unity across languages on Pentecost, to unity in God last Sunday, to division - the real world. Perhaps Ordinary might not be a bad description after all.

This gospel reading actually contains two stories: It begins with Jesus' family, then moves into this confrontation with the Scribes, before returning to his family. The fancy word for this is "Intercalation" which basically means it's a sandwich. This is a device used often by the writer of Mark - so often in fact that people call it a "Markan Sandwich." It's a useful tool to help the hearer because each story helps interpret the other.

So beginning with the "bread" of our Markan sandwich - the family bits - it's important to know how important family was in Jesus' time and place. I'll quote Ched Myers here, who wrote a commentary on the Gospel of Mark called *Binding the Strong Man*.

Kinship (Family) was the axis of the social world in antiquity. The extended family structure determined personality and identity, controlled vocational prospects, and most importantly facilitated socialization. For Mark, then, kinship is the backbone of the very social order Jesus is struggling to overturn...

Yes, you heard that right - "struggling to overturn." While I might describe it differently, the question of why Jesus might be struggling to overturn this system is a curious one. His family comes out to "restrain him" - "He has gone out of his mind," they say. But as with Mark, we'll come back to this.

So then to the Scribes, calling Jesus Beelzebub or Satan - ruler of the demons. They are saying that he's able to cast out demons because he rules them. Jesus, brilliantly, picks apart their logic and puts them in a "bind." "How can Satan cast out Satan?" he begins. Kingdoms, houses, Satan divided against themselves cannot stand, he continues. Then into the house of this Strong Man. Let's linger here for a moment.

The kingdom he is referring to could be rhetorical, but it is most likely Rome he was talking about - the occupying force in Palestine during the time of Jesus. Starting to line up these "strong men," the "house" needs to be recognizable and powerful too. The Temple, described elsewhere as the dwelling place of God, fits the description (a veritable powerhouse). It's easy to imagine ways a kingdom might be divided against itself - look at the divisions of our life together as Americans today. But what is the Temple division to which Jesus points? Whatever it is Jesus states explicitly: that which is divided against itself, its end has come.

These scribes who probably worked for the temple might have heard this in Jesus' parable. The house of the strong man - is Jesus talking about them? "...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."

Jesus is throwing around some powerful insinuations here, and it just feels serious. Jesus has foiled their game, dogged their name calling, and rhetorically "tied them up." While it might have seemed entertaining to the crowd watching Jesus' best these scribes, perhaps it was sobering to them too that Jesus turns to the topic of forgiveness.

These scribes have come because they have heard what Jesus has been up to. So far in these first chapters of Mark, Jesus has cast out demons, healed the sick and infirm, and forgiven sins. One particular story stands out to me among these miraculous healings - Jesus healing a paralyzed man.

Remember with me. A man, completely paralyzed, carried on a mat by four of his friends. Jesus in a house, incredibly crowded. The friends make a hole in the roof and lower him down, laying him before Jesus. "When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralytic, "Son (x2), your sins are forgiven." "Blasphemy!" cry the scribes, "Who can forgive sins but God alone." Jesus says to them, "Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Stand up and take your mat and walk'? But so that you may know that I have authority on earth to forgive sins" he said to the paralytic - "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go home." The man stood, took his mat, and walked out "before all of them."

Sin is a sticky business - just as sticky today as it was back then. In fact, people with diseases or infirmities (including paralysis) were often viewed as sinners being punished for their sins. If you were suffering from Leprosy, if you were blind, if you had a demon, you had obviously done something to deserve it! Infirmity like that of this paralytic man meant you had incurred the wrath of God for something you had done. Viewed this way, such people were avoided, cutoff from society, cast out.

The Temple system served this kind of thinking. You went to the Temple, bought an animal to sacrifice, took it to the priests who ritually killed or burned it and you're all done! Having made your offering to God your sins were forgiven and you are restored to the community. Personal sin, personal sacrifice, personal forgiveness and reacceptance. Keeping this logic firmly in place carried incentive for the Temple system. As the arbiter of forgiveness (and thereby social reacceptance), it held incredible power. The forgiveness Jesus offered threatened that power, that system, and the idea that our forgiveness can be bought and paid for.

Luther saw this logic at work in the Church of his time. The sale of indulgences. Buying forgiveness from God through the church was to Luther theologically incongruent with what the scriptures revealed of God through Christ. Forgiveness offered by a loving, merciful, unconditional God threatened the indulgence enterprise entirely. Luther railed against this system and the logic behind it. No, he said, you don't get forgiveness through anything you do - rather, God's love and forgiveness come to us as pure gift, the very grace of God.

Jesus upsets the whole system when he says, "Your sins are forgiven." You are not suffering because of your sin. You live in a state of forgiveness by the grace, the gift, of God. And in the affronted faces of those scribes, Jesus illustrates that state, the forgiven state of this paralyzed man, to all - Get up, take your mat and go.

What is it Jesus did here? He restored this man to community. All those who fled at the sight of him, who blamed him for his affliction, they fall silent and give him welcome. As with the lepers, the blind men, the infirm, the demon possessed - in Jesus' healing, he restores the afflicted to community, to family. But here that healing literally stands for forgiveness, and in that forgiveness he is "healed" back into community.

Back to bread. Referring to those around him, he says, "Here are my mother and brothers"? Not these calling for me outside, but whoever does the will of God. You are my brothers and sisters and mothers and sons and daughters. You are my family.

Jesus is not rejecting his family. Rather, he is re-ordering a system of division by lowering its walls, opening its gates, calling us into oneness. He takes the closed family connection and draws that circle wide, making it one that includes, that holds more than blood ties, that unites everyone in his embrace. And in so doing, family becomes a mold of this new community. This new kinship model, reaching beyond our familial boundaries, encompasses us all and draws us into one. This oneness begins to resemble some of Jesus first words in Mark - the kingdom come near.

So what is the will of God? What is this thing that brings us into one family with Jesus? It is forgiveness.

I have many stories I could tell you about refusing to forgive someone who wronged me, and I bet you have those stories too. The thing I've learned about forgiveness though is that, when you don't do it, you remain bound - literally tied up in knots. Does that resonate? It's as though forgiveness isn't really for the person who wronged you, it's for you: Withholding our forgiveness divides us against ourselves, tightening those knots and leaving us bound and helpless, unable to stand. We are strong women and men who know the riches of forgiveness but forget them in the face of our hurt, our sense of betrayal, our judgement. Bound up in it, we break the oneness for which he struggled and died.

Then Jesus, unbound and still, seeing our struggle, tells us that we are forgiven, that we stand in a state of forgiveness for all time. He calls to us, even now, telling us to remember. Take and eat, he says - the knot slips. Given for you, shed for you. We step out of our ropes, the looters run for the hills, and we find relationship once more - with him, with each other.

This is but one way the Spirit shows up in our lives - loosening our bonds, giving us back to each other. The Spirit blows, reminding us of this forgiven state we stumble around in, overcoming all division and pulling us into the wide embrace of the family of God. Division remains, but the Spirit ignites our memory and faith spurs us forward, to mend division where we find it, to proclaim forgiveness where it is forgotten, and to draw that Godly kingdom yet nearer.

AMEN.