Mark 3:20-35

20and the crowd came together again, so that they 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.’

31 Then 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.’

**Who Is My Family?**

1. A Picture

I’d like to present you with a visual idea of what is going on in today’s gospel lesson:

Imagine the scene: Jesus in a house, and a crowd made up of people from all regions and ethnicities gathered together, packed into the house like sardines. There isn’t enough room for anyone to eat. The crowd is so pressed in around Jesus that his family can’t even come near him. They’ve come because they’re a bit worried; some people are saying that he’s crazy. Who are these people who are saying that Jesus is nuts? They’re the scribes. Though we’re not told where *physically* the scribes are in this episode, they are talking about Jesus rather than to him; “*He* is possessed by a demon…” So as the word filters through to Jesus, it is the family that hears first from the scribes. Perhaps Jesus’ family has heard from the scribes before they even arrived on the scene. Perhaps their words have alarmed the family. The scribes are saying that Jesus is possessed by none other than Beelzebub, a foreign god, the “Lord of the flies,” so to speak. And what Mark is showing us here is that everyone’s proximity to Jesus corresponds to their *spiritual* distance from Jesus; the crowd are really Jesus’ “inner circle,” while even his blood relatives think he’s a little soft in the head, and the scribes think he’s possessed by the devil.

And just as the picture Mark paints shows layers of closeness to Jesus, the narrative too, which comes to us in a sort of “sandwich” structure, describes levels of distance:

From the crowds gathered tightly around Jesus, we move to the family that’s concerned that Jesus is crazy, to the scribes who say Jesus is possessed. Jesus, speaking to the crowd that is gathered so tightly around him, addresses the scribes’ accusation and counters it by accusing the scribes of blaspheming the Holy Spirit. Someone in the crowd then gives Jesus the news of his family is waiting outside to steal him away to safety. Jesus, again speaking to this crowd, asks who his true family is, namely those who do the will of God, namely the crowd who are both physically and spiritually closest to Jesus. The crowd is his family, for the crowd are the ones who literally follow him the closest.

1. The significance of family

It is impossible to read today’s passage without having some emotional reaction, particularly around the issue of family. Family is important. Some of you may recall how nervous you were when you brought your spouse-to-be home for the first time to meet your parents, and if you were the spouse-to-be, you remember how nervous you were. Did any of you experience any unannounced visits from mom and dad?

Different families have different levels of brokenness, and if you come from a very dysfunctional family, you may feel like giving Jesus an “amen” when he says that those who do the will of God are his true mother and brothers and sisters. But if you come from a relatively functional family, you may feel some pain over those same remarks. Members of a family are naturally bound to one another. We prevent people from teasing our little brother precisely because he’s our little brother. As the youngest in my family, I reaped the benefits of having an older brother and older sister, and I’m sure there are ways they protected me that I’m not aware of. Parents may teach us to take responsibility for our behavior, but if a teacher ever steps out of line and humiliates a child, a parent will be there to defend their child. Why? Because that is *our* child. The fact that the teacher may embarrass another child may disturb our parents, but action is taken when the embarrassed party is our own flesh and blood.

And part of what Jesus’ mother and brothers are doing is protecting their kin. Doesn’t Jesus realize the danger? The scribes have a lot of authority; they can declare someone clean or unclean, and if you are declared unclean (and being an agent of Beelzebub would certainly qualify you as “unclean), you were banished from the village. Back in Jesus’ day, if you were a demoniac, they chained you up and kept you away from the village so as not to contaminate others. Remember that it was not that long ago that people who were supposedly possessed or in collusion with evil forces were burned at the stake, or thrown in a lake with a stone around their neck. Jesus’ family is doing what families *should* do, namely keep their kin out of harm’s way. Doesn’t he care? Doesn’t he want their protection? If you’re in trouble with the law, and your mother comes to plea on your behalf, it doesn’t help to say, “She’s not really my mother.”

But what is more troubling is the way Jesus dismisses his family, *particularly* his mother. How would you feel as a mother, as word trickles back to you from the crowd and someone says, “Jesus says that his real mother is one who does the will of God.” Ouch!

If you come from a loving family, a mother and father who have raised you in love, a brother or sister who have always treated you well, with whom you share so many fond memories, the fact that you have a faith in Christ that they do not share can lead you to feel great tension. Though we live in a pluralistic society where we live and let live, where we respect people of all faiths and no faith, we must confess that when members of our own family profess other faiths or no faith, our hearts ache. Some of you have asked me and others to pray for some of your family that doesn’t know Jesus Christ. You are agonized because you feel that Jesus and your friends at church are your true family, but you want others in your immediate family to belong to the spiritual family that you love as well.

1. Spiritual connectedness

But we are not who we used to be. We are children of God who are becoming more and more conscious of this every day. And as we become more conscious of our connection with God, as our relationship with Christ deepens, that relationship starts to supersede all others. If members of our family aren’t walking the same path we are, there is a tension between us. I know many of you have felt a bond with others in this church as we’ve prayed and praised and worshiped, we’ve laughed and cried together. You may find relationships here at church that are much deeper, more caring and more loving, than the relationships you have with your family outside church, and I thank God for this, because a church should be a place where a divine love is shared and experienced. You may embrace the church and find great comfort here.

We grow into a family that is not based on biology but on the Holy Spirit that draws us to God and obedience to his will, a Spirit that deepens the bonds of love between us, a Spirit that connects us to Jesus Christ as it connects us to one another, to the point where we begin to resemble “the crowd” that gathers tightly around Jesus, so tightly that our own family members may seem far away from us. And so the joy that we may experience together here is tinged with pathos as we wish that our closest family members could be part of what we experience in Christ. Commitment to the will of God takes priority over our commitment to our family, because obedience to family can sometimes lead us to contradict the will of God. Families can pressure us into doing what is best for “our own” to the exclusion of those in true need. Treating members of our family preferentially is the same as denying justice to others. When led by Christ, our family becomes those who serve the living God and not necessarily our blood relatives.

1. Why we celebrate today

This is why today is truly a celebration for Jack and Angelina…and for all of us. Because the best case scenario I can imagine is one in which parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, all remain on the same page when it comes to faith, when it comes to priorities, where the love of God overlaps the love for children or parents or grandparents. There is no conflict between God’s will and your brother’s will, where the goal remains the same, where we are united in one faith, in one Spirit. And when the will of God becomes our driving principle, each member of a family can serve as the Spiritual glue that helps the family stay together, because each can remind the other when one is going off track, where even a child can help direct the parents in an attitude of Christian love.

And so the take home for today is a prayer for families, yours and others, to walk on the same path, to set the same priority in Christ. As disciples of Christ, we are bound to God more tightly than we are bound to our own parents or children. But if a family shares that faith and that commitment to God’s will, then there will never be conflict, never a tension.

And for those who feel that tension as your relationship with Christ grows and you feel that something is not right with your relationship to family, take heart. Keep your eyes on Christ, as the crowd did.