

Mark 3:20-35

²⁰Then he went home. And the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat.

²¹When his family heard it, they went out to control him. They 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.”

³¹Then 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.”

Being Part of the Crowd

Jesus declares that “those who do the will of God are my mother and brothers and sisters.” That of course begs the question, “What *is* the will of God?” At first it seems pretty obvious; just follow Jesus’ example. Do what he does. In today’s reading we find Jesus apparently casting out demons, healing people who are possessed by evil spirits, so it seems that if we take our cue from Jesus, what we are supposed to do is cast out demons, or combat evil in whatever form it takes wherever we see it – you may remember that this is part of our confession of faith which you can find in your hymnal on page 40 if you’re curious. But is evil always that obvious? And are there not times in our lives when we run into a conflict between serving God and serving something other than God, when it becomes difficult to do the right thing, or when we can’t even figure out what the right thing is? I think we deceive ourselves to think otherwise, and I believe today’s scripture reading draws our attention to that difficulty.

What’s disturbing about this story is that both the scribes and Jesus’ own family are opposing him; I did my homework with this text and found a very disturbing mistranslation, which I did correct on the Power Point; those who translated the Bible into our New Revised Standard Version and our King James Version didn’t want Jesus family to look bad, and so the NRSV says in verse 21 that his family comes to get Jesus because *people were saying* that he was out of his mind; the KJV takes the family completely out of the verse and says that when *friends* heard about what Jesus was doing *they* went out to try to control him because *they* thought he was out of his mind. The correct translation is that his family thought Jesus was out of his mind, and that idea casts a negative light on his mother Mary, and so I think that translators thought it best to “honor Jesus’ mother” by painting her in a better hue. The reason I bring this up is so you can see how difficult it is for us to grasp that notion that Jesus’ own family was working against him. The family thinks he’s nuts and the religious authorities think he’s evil, healing all the wrong

people on all the wrong days. It is the *crowd* who Jesus identifies with – not his blood relatives and not the religious authorities. Jesus looks at the *crowd* and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers...those who do the will of God are my mother and brothers and sisters.”

The difficulty we have with this passage results from our tendency to defend our family and defend our church as sacred entities. The irony is that neither Jesus’ family nor the “church” he grew up in considered him to be doing the will of God. Jesus was not behaving as a good son/sibling, nor was he behaving like a good Jew. The folks from the Temple called him evil, and his family gave him the benefit of the doubt and called him crazy, but neither considered him to be doing what was right. This story shakes the foundation of the two most trusted and “sacred” institutions that we know of: church and family. Shouldn’t I do what Mom tells me to do? Of course I should. Are the pastor and the core members of my church leading me in the right direction? Of course they are. Today’s reading tells us something different. It warns us that it’s not always easy for us to “do the right thing” when the things we honor the most directly oppose the will of God.

And standing in opposition to family and religion, in Mark’s gospel, is the ever-present *crowd*. The *crowd* appears in nearly every chapter of Mark. It’s not a nice word, *crowd*. We don’t invite *crowds* into our home; we have *company*. Our police exercise certain tactics called *crowd control*. We hate getting into a *crowded* subway train. In order to get rid of an unwanted guest, we say what? *Two’s company; three’s a what? A crowd*. We seek to escape crowds in our homes and in our church. Yet it is the crowd that follows Jesus. It is the crowd that Jesus declares is his true family in this story.

Both family and church can fall into the trap of avoiding *crowds*, of retreating and protecting themselves from *the crowds*. of looking out solely for what they believe to be the best interests of those who fall within their respective walls, and there seems to be nothing evil or un-virtuous about that, about defending our kin or our church, right or wrong. Tensions arise when the crowd starts to infiltrate our church or our family, when we invite the wrong people to come *within* those walls. And what happens when the ‘wrong’ people come into our homes or our church? Do we start asking people to leave? (Excuse me, I think you’re in the wrong church; you must be looking for the church up the street).

Churches find themselves in conflict with *the crowds* all the time. Over many years, churches can get so set in their ways that they put up barriers that prevent *the crowd* from coming there, and if the church opens up and becomes truly hospitable, truly welcoming, even *inviting the crowd* into the church, so many who consider themselves part of that church *family* feel that there is no longer room for them in *their* church. *THEIR* church. Not Christ’s Church. But it is the very *crowd* that so repulses so many church members that Jesus declares to be *his family*. And if you close your doors to the crowds, and close your hearts to the crowd, you are closing the doors on Jesus himself, and God will carry on with his plans without you.

I don’t believe it’s possible to do the will of God without embracing *the crowd*, because it’s the crowd that comes to hear Jesus, it’s the crowd that comes to be healed, it’s the crowd that comes to learn, and it’s the crowd that truly seeks to do the will of God. And when you seek to protect yourself from *the crowd*, when you erect barriers to keep the crowd away, when you think of

your church or your homes as places to go to get away from the rest of the world, you're hardly doing God's will. We're called to engage *the crowd*. We're charged with ministering to *the crowd*. We can't do that if we *fear* the crowd, or avoid the crowd.

But too often we *do* fear the crowd. The crowd gets in the way of our safe, structured, predictable life. The *crowd* is unpredictable and requires too much of our time and attention. It's far easier for us to lock *the crowd* out, to turn on the television and tune *out* the crowd. It's easy for a church to do the same thing, to avoid the crowd, to put on the smile when folks come in church while scrutinizing whether or not they will fit in or if we should discourage them from joining and hope that they stay with the crowd outside the walls of the church. The church may actually be able to maintain itself by letting just enough people in to keep the coffers full, to keep the bills paid. But our ministry should be the same as the ministry of Jesus, and he declares *the crowd* to be his family. The question you need to ask yourself this morning is, "Are you part of the crowd? Do you identify more with the ones crowding around Jesus, or would you try to protect *yourself* from that crowd? And if you are avoiding the crowd, if you're protecting yourself or "your" church from that crowd, are you doing the will of God? Are you part of Jesus' family?"

Next week we'll be looking at the parable of the mustard seed, a parable that raises a lot of the same disturbing questions that we must ask ourselves this morning. A mustard plant was and is a weed to a farmer. It's a nuisance that you would like to eradicate if possible. But Jesus compares it the Kingdom of God, a comparison that would be very disturbing to a lot of farmers. Are there aspects of God's Kingdom that seem disturbing to you? And if so, are you trying to prevent God's kingdom from taking root?

This week it's the crowds; next week it's the weeds. Pray that God would empower you to lose your fears of the crowd, and to become a better servant of God by serving those around you, to be part of Jesus' family.