

Sunday, June 9, 2024
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35
"Re-defining Family"
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

My family used to live in another part of Connecticut. And about once a month two Jehovah Witnesses stopped by my house. It was always the same young man and usually one he was training. I guess it must have been a good house to stop by with a trainee because I didn't slam the door in their face, I always listened and took their material, and I usually debated with them, just a bit, in a nice way. And yet, even though I told them I am an ordained minister, and I told them all about my faith and my church - which I would never leave because we ordain women for one thing and they don't, we are open and accepting of all and they aren't, they consistently stopped by every single month. I couldn't help but think why? Why did they bother with me? I think the main reason was because so many other houses had been so mean to them.

It's probably why we are so hesitant to talk about our faith, our church, in public, with those we don't know well, as well as those we know very well. Is this world so very different from the world Jesus live and preached in? Like Jesus, people are still being persecuted for their beliefs, their faith and for expressing it. But maybe there is a way to be Christ's disciples out there, to be what Pastor Gin spoke about last Sunday, being authentic about our faith, without being intrusive or offensive. And yes, this all relates to our somewhat disturbing Scripture passage from the Gospel of Mark.

So, now that we are through Lent, Easter, Pentecost, Trinity Sunday, mainly using the lovely Gospel of John, we are back in what we call "ordinary time" and the Gospel of Mark. Mark is a very different writer than John. In the Gospel of John, Jesus is wise and confident, certain of his purpose and profound in his teaching. He is calm, capable and in control. Mark gives us a very different Jesus. We are not even that far into the Gospel of Mark and already Jesus has the crowds wondering about him, his family afraid for him or maybe of him! And the religious leaders, against him. As one pastor writes, "And all he's done so far is announce the coming kingdom of God, call some disciples, cast out a demon or two, and heal a bunch of sick people." (1) At first glance you would think, why all the anger and fuss and rejection? "He has gone out of his mind!" He is Beelzebul!

Then again, one of those disciples he called was a tax collector, he cast out demons and did much of his healing work on the Sabbath, and he wasn't put off in the least when approached by a leper or a "unclean" woman. This charismatic Jesus who welcomes just anyone, I mean anyone, makes them question - has he gone too far? Is he too "outside the box?" Have too many outsiders been included, too many sinners welcomed, too many norms violated? And yet, perhaps, he hasn't gone out of his mind but as one writes, perhaps he has gone beyond their minds, and beyond our minds. The boundlessness, the inclusiveness, the unwillingness to be limited by regulation or convention, the unrestrained mercy and grace - all of it is beyond what [they could grasp and frankly, what] we can grasp." (2)

And here's the thing when we commit ourselves to offering the same kind of unimaginable gracious inclusion that Jesus exhibits, we're bound to encounter some doors slamming in our faces. I don't know if people will call us demon-possessed, but we shouldn't be too surprised if

people close to us, even in our own family, may think we're a bit nuts. Think about that for a minute.

So, to explain to the crowds why he is the way he is, Jesus uses a couple parables. The first is to say, a house divided against itself cannot stand, which is interesting. Not only, as one observes, because it gave Abraham Lincoln a moral foundation for healing the nation in the 1860s, [and what Jesus saw back then, a place divided], it also serves as an indictment of the growing divisions in our common life. From immigration to reproductive rights, from education to the environment, from the conduct of elections to economic policy dissension, from legislatures to school boards, from Congress to city council, how much more division can we endure before the house falls and crushes everyone?" (3)

This past Tuesday evening right here is Westerly eight teenagers around 14-18 years old started a brawl with 20 youth and adults gathered to watch! In the end, two adults and two teenagers, one only 14 years old were arrested for assault or battery, disorderly conduct, obstructing police and resisting arrest. What is wrong here? I went to a clergy gathering this week and one of the clergypersons husbands teaches middle school. She said so many teachers are resigning in middle school because the behavior of the students is just so bad. Is it the result of the Covid isolation period and the age they were when they lived in such fear and loneliness? Is it social media which is out of control and has the capability of completely destroying the reputation of even the very young?! There are so many divisions out there, houses, schools, neighborhoods, families divided. A house divided cannot stand.

In the next parable, Jesus points to "the strong man". The "strong man" must be dealt with before anything else can happen. The "strong man" is the cause that must be addressed for meaningful progress and lasting change. The strong man can be a structure or a stereotype, a prejudice or a falsehood, a memory or a regret. The strong man is what holds us captive, continually exerting influence and accumulating power. Whatever form it may take, tying up the strong man requires persistent courage and committed truth-telling, following the example of Jesus himself. (4) To get at the heart of these divisions.

You see, Jesus offers meeting people where they are, accepting all who are interested, into God's kingdom. And the question for us is, are we doing the same? Are we actually pushing the boundaries of what's socially and religiously acceptable in order to reach more people with the always, surprising, often upsetting, unimaginable gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus? I'm not so sure. That takes real courage.

The session has been reading and discussing a recent edition of Presbyterian Outlook Magazine, the issue was titled, "Faith Forward: Bold ideas for innovative, transformative ministries". It asks the question, what if our serving Jesus Christ here isn't about making good church members? Or making good Presbyterians? What if it is something deeper than that? What if our job was about making disciples of Jesus Christ? What would that look like? (5)

I think it begins with a redefinition of what family is. When Jesus' mother and brothers come to call him, you would think that Jesus would give them a place of honor. They are family, after all. Instead, Jesus again pushes against and beyond accepted categories, suggesting that family intimacy is defined by spiritual companionship instead of biological connection. The family of Jesus is comprised of those who join him in seeking to do God's will. It is a new creation, a new humanity, a new way of being intimately related to one another.

Today we recognize the importance of music in our worship. Christian worship isn't some mysterious, dark, esoteric rite. It's a family meal with everyone around the table; it's the extended family gathering in song and spirit. We know the choir is a family. The Bell Choir is another family. And in a world of grandparents without grandchildren anywhere near them, with single-parent families, marriages under stress, brawls on the street, divisions everywhere, we all need a bigger family than the one we were born into. And in this family, here, we can't choose, we can't just not call or avoid if we disagree, we must accept every single person who worships here, because Jesus loves us all, so must we!

And so I ask, how many of you were brought into the church, into your faith, by a famous tv evangelist or a popular theologian? And how many of you were brought into the church because of a parent, a grandparent, a friend? Someone who simply cared about you. We have the authority and power to do this, to be Christ's disciples. As one pastor writes, "only faith – not who we are, not our successes or giftedness or influence or power – but only faith establishes this radical 'freedom' of speech that can proclaim the Gospel in and out of season, despite all hindrances." (6) Being authentic, having courage of conviction, being unapologetically Christian or what I would say is to make people curious, make them curious about where you go to church, what things you are involved in, it's what I have said since I arrived here – invite, come and see, come and meet our family. It is what Paul tells us in the passage we read from 2 Corinthians, because we believe, we must speak, we must extend the invitation for the glory of God.

At the very end of the gospel of Matthew, Jesus reminds his followers, "do not worry about how you are to speak or what you are to say . . . for it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of God speaking through you."

As one writes, "This passage puts before us the radical Jesus, reminding us again that he is beyond our control. This is Jesus defying assumptions, living abundantly, loving recklessly, undeterred by opposition, willing to accept that his words and deeds will provoke and irritate, even as they surprise and convict. He is focused on bearing witness to the reign of God, a reality that threatens the powerful and shatters the familiar, while touching the untouchable and gathering those otherwise cast out. This Jesus sees the limits of our arrangements, procedures and polity. Pursuing God's will is what matters most to him. God's intents are healing and forgiveness, mending the wounded, binding up the broken-hearted, and lifting the lowly. These are also the goals of Jesus' life. Whatever the cost, however many the accusations, whatever the outrage, however many will be shocked or confused or disappointed, Jesus resolutely embraces what God has set before him. Then, in perhaps the most radical move of all, he invites us to join him in this holy work." (7) Maybe not door to door witnesses but this family and invite others to the table, this place.

I close with the poem called *The Blessing that Scorches us* by Jan Richardson

- ❖ Here's one thing you must understand about this blessing: it is not for you alone.
- ❖ It is stubborn about this. Do not even try to lay hold of it, if you are by yourself, thinking you can carry it on your own.

- ❖ To bear this blessing you must first take yourself to a place where everyone does not look like you or think like you, a place where they do not believe precisely as you believe, where their thoughts and ideas and gestures are not exact echoes of your own.
- ❖ Bring your sorrow. Bring your grief. Bring your fear. Bring your weariness, your pain, your disgust at how broken the world is, how fractured, how fragmented by its fighting, its wars, its hungers, its penchant for power, its ceaseless repetition of the history it refuses to rise above.
- ❖ I will not tell you this blessing will fix all that.
- ❖ But In the place where you have gathered, wait. Watch. Listen. Lay aside your inability to be surprised, your resistance to what you do not understand. See then whether this blessing turns to flame on your tongue, set you to speaking what you cannot fathom
- ❖ Or opens your ear to a language beyond your imagining that comes as a knowing in your bones, a clarity in your heart that tells you
- ❖ This is the reason we were made: for this ache that finally opens us,
- ❖ For this struggle, this grace that scorches us toward one another and into the blazing day.

May it be so, amen.

(1) Lose, The Rev. David. "Offering a Wide Welcome". 6/1/2015.

(2) Wurster, The Rev. John. Presbyterian Outlook. 6/9/2024.

(3) Ibid.

(4) Ibid.

(5) Kadzban, The Rev. Andy. Presbyterian Outlook, "Pastoring in a secular age".

(6) Lange, The Rev. Dirk Lange, Commentary second Sunday Pentecost. Working preacher.org