

“WHOEVER DOES THE WILL OF GOD...”

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, June 7, 2015

Pentecost 2/Ordinary 10 – Communion – 10:00 a.m.

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Mark 3:20-27, 31-35

Then Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is



divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. But 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....

Then Jesus' mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

In light of Jesus' reputation, as a faith healer and exorcist, his family fears that he is delusional, and the religious scholars accuse him of being demon-possessed. Jesus' response to the religious scholars serves to confirm his identity and his authority: he is Spirit-empowered, so he is neither delusional nor demon-possessed. We who follow Jesus already know this about him—that he is God's Beloved Son and that he is empowered by the Holy Spirit—so this aspect of the story holds no surprises for us.

Jesus' response to his family's fears about his mental health is an entirely different matter. Though it may not sound surprising or shocking to us, it must have been surprising and even shocking to his first-century audience. For Jesus lived in a time and culture when family meant everything. When he expanded the definition of his family to include everyone who was doing the will of God, or even radically redefined family in this way, he was going against the very “backbone of the...social order”¹ of his people and culture.

In our world, there are more than a few people who want, or need, to distance themselves from their family of origin. For some people, who grew up in abusive or dysfunctional environments, the only way for them to find their way to a fulfilling life is to cut themselves off completely from their family of origin. So Jesus' words in today's text—“Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother”—can have a very positive ring for folks like this. It's nice to know that we can think of ourselves as Jesus' sisters and brothers. But I'm sure that Jesus' words did not have a positive ring to them in the ears of his mother and his brothers.

This story from Mark's larger Story of Jesus raises some significant questions for us as hearers and readers of the story. First, the story asks us to take seriously both the concerns of Jesus' family and the accusations of Jesus' opponents. His family thinks he may be delusional, and his opponents think he may be demonic.²

It's not uncommon, in societies like first-century Palestinian Judaism, for those who exercise political and religious power to feel threatened by those “upstart controllers of spirits”³ who exercise a different kind of power: the power of healing. Wandering faith healers like Jesus were often accused of being in league with the devil, since only God or the devil had the kind of power that could drive out demons or cure physical disabilities. The “scribes from Jerusalem” believed in their hearts that **they** were in league with God, and so Jesus, this upstart exorcist, must have been in league with the devil.

What we know from Mark's story of Jesus, however, is that Jesus has **already** been through a power struggle with the devil (in the wilderness temptation) and has emerged victorious from that struggle. Jesus has already defeated the prince of demons, which explains why he is able to carry out exorcisms—to drive out demons from people who have been possessed by

¹ Myers, 168.

² Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man – A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, 164.

³ David Hollenbach, cited in Myers, 165.

them. He has already bound up the “strong man” (Beelzebul or Satan) and is thus able to “plunder his house” by driving out the lesser demons.

In Jesus' view, it is the scribes, those representatives of the religious and political establishment concentrated in Jerusalem, who are in league with the devil. As is so often the case, the religious and political establishment benefits from the status quo and isn't interested in changing. But the overwhelming majority of the people in Jesus' time did not benefit from the status quo. In fact, there's persuasive evidence, from different times and cultures, that an unjust or oppressive status quo can actually cause demon possession. So someone like Jesus, who has the power to drive out demons, is not only helping individual sufferers, he's also challenging the status quo and those who benefit most from the status quo.

Challenging the status quo, whether in the first century or in the twenty-first century, isn't always an easy thing to do. In Jesus' time and place, challenging the status quo was a dangerous thing to do. The Roman empire, along with its local collaborators, had little patience with anyone who was disruptive. Which helps us understand why Jesus' mother and brothers were concerned about him. They sensed that he was already under surveillance by the powers-that-be, and “to them it was lunacy for a marked man to continue to provoke the highest authorities in the land. He was courting disaster, and they wished to protect him—as well as their family reputation.”⁴

We can say that Jesus in this story is caught between the fears of his family, who want desperately to protect him, and the hostility of the religious and political authorities, who want desperately to silence him. Jesus, however, refuses to be protected or silenced. For Jesus knows that he is neither delusional nor demonic. Rather, he knows that he is doing exactly what God has called him to do.

We can also say about this story that Jesus is here embodying and enacting what he is preaching and teaching: the nearness of the kingdom of God. For the kingdom of God represents a new social and spiritual and political culture that is characterized by justice, by mercy, and by humble faith, to borrow from the prophet Micah. The kingdom of God represents a new social and spiritual and political culture in which there is a place at the table for everyone. “Whoever does the will of God,” says Jesus—**Whoever** does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother. Whoever does the will of God is invited to, and welcomed at, my table.

In light of this story about Jesus, we can say about the church that the members of the church make up the new family of Jesus. We are his brothers and his sisters. He is our elder brother. He is the one who helps us know and do the will of God. He is the one who helps us align our lives with God's design for our lives. Jesus is the one who calls us to be partners in his service, who calls us to ministries of grace.⁵ He is the one who challenges us to be better

⁴ Myers, 167-8.

⁵ Jane Parker Huber, “Called as Partners in Christ's Service.”

people. He is the one who comforts us when we fall short of our hopes and dreams. He is the one who continues to accompany us on our journeys of faith: in life, in death, in life beyond death.

As we follow Jesus together, we can learn from him “fresh new lines of faith to trace.” In the words of Albert Schweitzer, who was a biblical scholar, a musician, a medical doctor, and an amazing humanitarian:

Jesus “comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake-side, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks the same word, 'Follow thou Me' and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our times. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and as an [inexpressible] mystery, they shall learn in

⁶ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. Cited in John Ackerman, *Listening to God: Spiritual Formation in Congregations* (The Alban Institute, 2001), 96.