

The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Second Sunday after Pentecost – June 6, 2021
Mark 3:20-35

Well! There's a lot going on in our Gospel lesson this morning. We've got a seeming battle between good and evil, family drama, religious-political intrigue, and building danger. We've also got some serious name-calling going on: Beelzebul! Ruler of demons! Crazy man!

The setting is a house in which Jesus is attempting to eat dinner after a long day. In fact, a few words before our lesson begins, Mark tells us that it is Jesus' "home". Our reading begins mid-sentence, recalling the huge, frenzied crowd of Jews and Gentiles desperate to get close to the man reported to possess power over sickness and demons. As is typical in Mark's brusque and rapid-paced gospel, in a mere three short chapters, Jesus has appeared out of nowhere, been baptized and bested Satan, cast out a couple of demons, cooled a fever, claimed sovereignty over the Sabbath, and healed a leper, a paralytic, and many others. All this and a preaching tour that drew thousands. This is impressive stuff!

Now, Jesus returns home for a meal and a rest. But the gathering crowds interrupt his respite with their pressing needs. This mob of misfits, crazies, sick and damaged, and those for whom Jesus' message of the good news is a desperately needed lifeline, are all demanding attention and the presence of Jesus. He can't even be left alone to eat, Mark says.

But joining this growing mob of followers, disciples, and the desperate, are also Jesus' detractors – the scribes and his home-town neighbors. Uneasy with Jesus' demonstrations of divine power and his growing band of followers, and threatened by Jesus' upsetting of the power balance status quo, the scribes resort to dirty tricks.

It's all too familiar, isn't it? When we feel our status threatened or we determine our opponent as less worthy, we tend to go low. Remember the nasty names we would hurl at each other as children? Sometimes we didn't even understand what we were saying, but we knew the words had power and shouting them made us feel superior. Sticks and stone may break my bones but words will never hurt me – what a lie that is. The reason we resorted to name-calling when we were children was because we knew it worked. Name-calling strips status from another and resets the power balance. Tearing another down elevates our own position. It's a cheap shot, but it works.

And Mark gives us an ancient example of this schoolyard scenario of childish name-calling and fear-filled trash-talking. Jesus' mother and siblings rush to his defense as the hometown people call him a crazy-man, that he has lost his senses. They wince at the dangerous disrespect from the scribes who call him evil and possessed by Beelzebul.

But this name-calling is an act of those who are afraid. Afraid of losing power and respect to this uncontrollable prophet and healer. Afraid that the crowds will grow and will actually listen to this man proclaiming not only the coming kingdom but also the great overturning of the systems of power. Afraid that their influence and status might not be righteous after all. This deep existential and epistemic fear causes them to lash out against the source of this threat. And they do so in the way of all of us who are threatened and fear-motivated, they try to tear the man down. After all, what else can they do? They can't beat Jesus in debates of law or theology. They can't replicate his acts of divine power. They cannot draw his crowds of followers and disciples. He terrifies them, and, so, they mock him. They call him names.

The irony here is that, instead of diminishing or defeating Jesus, this name calling shines a spotlight. It calls attention to the fact that others sense his power and are threatened – and this attracts even more attention to him and his kingdom message. The crowds and scribes who seek to diminish Jesus by pasting labels on him accomplish exactly the opposite. Jesus' fame and fan base grow daily, until the day when the weapons of words are exchanged for the real weapons of war and death. And yet, even at the cross, the insults and name-calling continue.

As I said at the beginning, this gospel lesson today is complicated and there is a lot going on. Beyond the name-calling, there is also the thorny issue of just whom Jesus is calling his mother and brothers and sisters. His family have heard the rumors and name-calling of Jesus and are concerned for him and his

well-being, so they come to him to restrain him – to protect him from himself and others; to take him away. But when a message is conveyed to Jesus that his mother and brothers are outside, Jesus responds with a chilling rebuke: they are not my family. Looking around him at the crowd of misfits, crazies, and his relentlessly misunderstanding disciples, he says, “This is my family.”

As a mother myself, I admit to a twinge of discomfort at this dismissal – no one wants to hear that from the one they love. And it can be easy to identify with Jesus’ family and the scribes. But while there is more going on in this story than a simple rejection of family or the church authorities in favor of newfound family of friends, it is also true that these are the very institutions and people that Jesus rebuffs for failing to recognize who he is. Perhaps it is because they are too close to him or too invested in their constructions of righteousness to clearly hear his message.

It is important to remember that though rejected by Jesus, neither his family nor the scribes are evil. Rather, they are committed to protecting the one they love and to preserving religious life in the midst of troubled times. They are doing what they think is right and good – for their beloved son and brother, as well as for their God and faith tradition. It is a peculiar and revelatory aspect of Jesus’ ministry that he is open to everybody: Gentiles, Jews, the poor, the dispossessed, the sick, the crazy, women, children, tax collectors, and sexual outcasts. The only people who seem to provoke Jesus’ intolerance and condemnation are his family and the normal, law-abiding scribes. As one commentator writes, “The ones closest to him, his family and those who are – like him! – dedicated to a life of piety, are those that are also farthest from him. They are the least able to make the leap from dedication to religion to openhearted love of God’s beloved, disfigured humanity. For these people, Jesus’ disordered love of humanity feels like falling off a cliff into chaos best symbolized by the demonic or insanity.”¹

No wonder they worry that Jesus is insane or possessed. His radical inclusion and love of humanity, as represented by the diversity of his gathered crowds, demonstrate a radical new orientation that seriously disrupts the societal systems and the status quo. This lesson also reveals the reality that it is sometimes difficult to discern the difference between madness or evil and the inbreaking of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus prophetically proclaimed a radical new community – one whose membership is not based on ritual or legal purity but rather on response to the call of the Holy Spirit. There seems to be no worthiness measurement to meet, merely a willingness to hear Jesus’ call and to join him. And this is truly good news!

When we think about who is near Jesus, it is not the morally perfect. It is just the diverse mess of humanity, with all its moral, physical, spiritual beauty and imperfection. Its folks like you, and you, and me. The broken, the lame, the spiritually sick, the flawed but still trying. In fact, the only ones not in the picture, the ones not pressing in at the doors and windows, desperate and aching to be near Jesus, are the ones who think they know what religion and family life is supposed to look like. Those who are not listening to the righteous but wild and disrupting call of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus proclaims a new community of the faithful. Insiders and outsiders are now defined, not by blood or proper expressions of piety, but by commitment to hearing the Holy Spirit’s call and doing God’s will. Jesus’ proclamation of this new definition of the family of the faithful is less a repudiation of his family of origin than it is a radical embrace of the community of the gathered who both see who Jesus really is and respond to his message the best way they know how. And, as we listen for the unfamiliar and disrupting call of the Holy Spirit, may we be assured that even our imperfect responses and incomplete understanding will be enough if only they are whole-hearted and we are love-filled.

Amen.

¹ Farley, Wendy; *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Vol. 3 (118)