

He's Meddling Now

Mark 3:7-35

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There's an old phrase used in the South when parishioners get uncomfortable with what the preacher is saying, "He's quit preachin' and gone to meddlin' now."

And one is tempted to think that about Jesus at this point in the story, especially when he rebukes his own mother. We are so accustomed to the close affinities between family and faith that Jesus' rejection of family startles us, maybe even offends us a little. Is he really saying that we have to be willing to break with our families if we are to follow him?

Jesus is building a new community. Today's reading opens with the multitudes following him. He is drawing disciples from all over the region. Displaced persons are coming to him. Scholar Ben Witherington even asks whether this multitude seeking healing are people who have been beaten by the authorities and are therefore fleeing for their own safety.

Herman Waetjen, a professor in the San Francisco Theological Seminary, describes the social setting of this Gospel:

[This is] a society in which the process of redemption has broken down. The use and the control of power by the ruling class are self-serving, oriented toward the preservation of the existing structures and institutions without regard for . . . mutuality . . . The system has no integrity.

And so Jesus makes it clear that he is forming a new community which will challenge all of this and provide a better world. Ched Myers calls Jesus' action both a "government in exile" and a "community of resistance." He goes up onto a mountain—always a symbolic site—and appoints the Twelve.

Now, Jesus didn't have only twelve disciples. In fact Mark makes it seem like there are hundreds of followers. Nor is it clear that these Twelve are to be seen as the leaders, because as we continue to read through the Gospel of Mark, you'll discover that Mark is highly critical of the Twelve and their inability to understand what Jesus is doing. In the other Gospels and in later tradition they do take on more a leadership role, but not here in Mark. You'll also notice that the Four Gospels can't agree on who they were.

So, many scholars believe that this is more a symbolic action. There had originally been twelve tribes of Israel, so Jesus is naming Twelve followers as his apostles to signify his formation of this new social order.

Herman Waetjen explains this new role,

By endowing them with the same authority he bears as the New Human Being to preach

the good news and to exorcise demons, Jesus establishes the egalitarian character of this new people of God. . . . They serve only as representatives of the community at large in which there are to be no vertical structures or hierarchical rankings. Related to Jesus, to the twelve, and to one another horizontally, all are to participate equally in the power, sovereignty, and freedom of the New Human Being.

To summarize—Jesus has received power and authority from God through the Holy Spirit and now Jesus is sharing that exact same power and authority with his followers, as symbolized by the twelve. This is not a hierarchy, but a table fellowship, a new family, built around full equality where every follower receives the power and authority of God.

And then they go to a home. I have pointed out before that the home is a repeated theme in the Gospel of Mark. The home symbolizes that Jesus is not only forming a new social order but a new family. The community of followers, the church, will be a new family, not based upon kinship and blood ties, but a common purpose and mission.

And so it is in this context, with Jesus surrounded by his new family, that his family of origin appears. They think he's gone crazy. Maybe they are only worried for his safety. Maybe they know that the authorities are now out to get him and instead of lying low he continues to do provocative things. Or maybe they really do think he's gone insane.

Remember, in the Gospel of Mark there is no birth story, no genealogy. Mark doesn't care about Jesus' family of origin for it is not important to the story that Mark is telling. Jesus' mother is never named in Mark and never appears as a character, which is very unlike the Gospel of Luke where she plays a prominent role. This reminds us that the different gospel writers had different goals in telling their stories.

As if to manifest his family's fears, some investigators from the capital arrive accusing Jesus of being Satanic. Now, how often do the authorities use inaccurate, charged language to try to turn a crowd against a reformer? They are also propounding a wild conspiracy theory—Jesus only looks like he's fighting Satan, he's really in league with him. The themes of this story are universal and continue to speak good news to us in our contemporary context.

This conversation is central to Jesus' conflict with his opponents. If they are right, then what he is saying and doing is wrong, even evil. And if he is right, then what they are doing is wrong. There is no "agreeing to disagree." Someone is right and someone is wrong. Reality, truth, goodness—these things exist. People may have a legal or constitutional right to believe whatever they want, but they are not entitled morally and intellectually to be wrong. Wrong ideas must be challenged through persuasion and refutation.

And so Jesus gives us a model of argumentation. He is casting out demons, destroying the power of Satan, and setting people free. Why would Satan destroy his own power? He wouldn't. It's illogical, nonsensical.

No, Jesus says he is like a thief, who has entered the strong man's house and bound him so that the house might be plundered. What a subversive metaphor to use! In essence Jesus confesses that he is a criminal, but his actions correspond to the will of God. It is his opponents who are in league with Satan, because their policies exclude and harm other people.

Jesus then announced a blanket pardon—everyone will be forgiven, no matter what they have done. This is the most subversive idea in all of human history. Grace and mercy are given freely, without merit or condition. We do not earn it. It is our free gift from a loving God.

The only thing, however, that can separate you from God's love is to do what Jesus' opponents have just done—to call God's liberating work evil.

If you exclude and oppresses people, work against justice and liberation, and the egalitarian new social order, then you are unable to participate fully in God's free grace because of your own blindness, fear, and hardness of heart.

And this is one reason I am so shocked by our contemporaries who call themselves Christians and yet actively work to exclude other people. They have somehow missed the most fundamental and basic teachings of the Gospel. They don't simply believe something different than we do, they are wrong in the way that Jesus' opponents were wrong.

Jesus has refuted the argument of the investigators from the capital and called them the agents of Satan. And then he turns back to his family of origin and rejects them for they have rejected what he is teaching. He will form a new family, centered on a common mission and purpose.

So, yes, this is one of the places where the Gospel can be very difficult for us. We enjoy comfortable religion, but the Gospel of Mark doesn't want to make us comfortable. Last year when I was at the Festival of Homiletics retired Methodist Bishop Will Willmon declared that preachers are not called to care for people, that if we want to care for people there are other professions that do that. Preachers are truth proclaimers and that often is discomfoting.

I confess that I like comfort food. I often wish things were easier. But 39 years ago I told Jesus I was going to follow him and sometimes that way is challenging and difficult.

Jesus is saying that we must be willing to break with what is familiar in order to participate in God's new work. Sometimes we do have to break with family and friends and elements of our past.

But here's the thing. God's new work is intended to include everyone. God is constantly working to bring those intransigent folk into the fold; it is their hardness of heart that separates them. They need only open their eyes to the truth, repent of their sin, and embrace the good news that is freely given to them.

Here's Herman Waetjen again:

The community of the New Human Being encompasses all who attach themselves to it for the recovery of their freedom and autonomy, their health and integrity, without any ranking of class and achievement, without any permanent levels of power and privilege.

God is creating a new family where all are welcome, all are empowered, all are free. If you get that, then you are part of the family. Why wouldn't everyone want to join?