“An Ever Expanding View”

Rev. Debra McGuire

Bethany Presbyterian Church

Mark 3:20-35

June 9, 2024

***Mark 3:20—35***

***20Then Jesus went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people 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 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.”***

Emily Saliers, ½ of the singing duo “Indigo Girls” once said, “Without questions, it wouldn’t be any fun to be human!”1

The context for her statement was a conversation about how, while growing up in her family, they were all allowed to ask questions all the time. Even after going to church on Sunday, they’d come home and all sit around the table and ask all kinds of questions like, how can there be a Trinity? Is Jesus God, or is God God?

If the Bible didn’t raise questions, and everything about our Christian faith tradition was all cut and dry, we wouldn’t be where we are today. And Christianity in the future might not exist. Without questions to prompt reflection, the world would just leave us in the dust, as we stagnated out of existence, because we weren’t relevant anymore. Would there be reasons to come together and worship? Preachers would lose their jobs. The Bible might not hold our interest. Without questions about what we read there, we could just read a rule book. Thank goodness for questions to keep us moving forward by offering us a chance to reflect, a chance to apply meaning in our own lives, a chance to share our thoughts with other people. Questions represent those things that our curiosity has unleashed.

In the gospel of Mark, Jesus is an action figure. Jesus is as Jesus does. Jesus early ministry has involved cleansing a man of his unclean spirit, cured Simon’s mother-in-law, cleansed a man with a skin disease, healed a man lowered through a ceiling, healed a man with a withered hand, not to mention healing any who were diseased or possessed who came to him in crowds everywhere he went. Jesus the action figure has also spent just these three chapters doing things that were against so many of the Jewish laws. All of Jesus’ actions led to conflicts with any temple authorities who were nearby. Many were nearby because they had specifically followed Jesus to see if he could explain himself.

That is exactly what has happened in today’s text. The crowds who had been gathering everywhere he went, had followed him to his home. Hearing the commotion his family decided that they needed – to restrain him. Many commentators have said they probably would have said something like “Stop doing whatever you’re doing. For goodness sake, don’t do any of it *here*, what will the neighbors think! People are talking! “He has gone out of his mind.” And of course there were the scribes, the learned of the law, taking it one step further, and accusing Jesus of being filled with, not just an unclean spirit, but under the control of Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons – Satan.

Here is a great place for a little behind-the-scenes-of-sermon-prep – more than twice, this whole passage for today was referred to as a Markan sandwich2. Yep, this is the kind of thing theologians come up with. Evidently the gospel of Mark contains many of these “sandwiches.” In the case of the text for today, there’s the bread – Jesus’ family as a topic begins and ends the passage, and the middle contains the parable about Satan and a house divided. I also promised that I would use a new word I learned in my sermon, so here it is. This “sandwich” style here, is called an intercalation.3 I know, right? Really? Intercalation? You’re not all writing that down? No wonder studying theology seems so dry. Putting one story inside of another story happens a lot in the gospel of Mark. That’s all they really needed to say.

But I digress.

For today, I’m going to stick with the bread, and ignore the middle of this Markan sandwich. I’m going to talk about Jesus’ interactions with and about his family, the beginning and end of today’s passage.

I cannot pass up an opportunity during Pride Month, to talk about family. Here at Bethany we have long stated that love is love. It has been important to the mission of this church to support the LGBTQ+ community. We are an open and affirming community of Christians. The LGBTQ+ community knows all about being rejected, stifled, set aside, judged, and hated, often by their own families and often by the larger Church community, causing a great deal of harm to individuals. Having been told that they have gone out of their minds, or even that they are possessed by Satan, the suicide rate among the LGBTQ+ community is high.

The Trevor Project is an organization that was started 25 years ago, who’s stated mission is “To end suicide among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer & questioning young people.” I have included links to information about the Trevor project in the footnotes.

Their site says, “LGBTQ+ young people are not inherently prone to suicide risk because of their sexual orientation or gender identity but rather placed at higher risk because of how they are mistreated and stigmatized in society.” Here are some statistics:

* LGBTQ+ young people are **more than four times as likely** to attempt suicide than their peers (Johns et al., 2019; Johns et al., 2020).
* The Trevor Project estimates that more than [**1.8 million**](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/blog/national-estimate-of-lgbtq-youth-seriously-considering-suicide/)LGBTQ+ young people (ages 13-24) seriously consider suicide each year in the U.S. — and at least one attempts suicide [**every 45 seconds**](https://www.thetrevorproject.org/2021/03/11/estimate-of-how-often-lgbtq-youth-attempt-suicide-in-the-u-s/).

The good news of the Gospel comes to us in Jesus’ words about family in today’s scripture. At the start of the passage, we don’t see or hear Jesus’ family. We just know that they hear the sound of the crowd and are worried enough that they want to try to restrain Jesus. Maybe they are worried about what the neighbors will say; or maybe they are politically aligned with those currently in power; or maybe they cannot afford to be caught up in any upheaval because they are just regular folks trying to get by and not get involved. Or maybe they are in complete agreement with all that Jesus is doing and they just want him to rest and eat.

It isn’t until Jesus is sitting down again with the crowd that his family comes up again. His family has come outside by now, and have sent for him. When he is told that his family is looking for him, he says something that sounds shocking. “Who are my mother and brothers?” In antiquity, the family was the most basic social organization.3 It’s important to note that Jesus is not rejecting his family at all. Rather than rejecting the bonds of family, Jesus is expanding the definition of family. Matt Skinner, commentator writes, “In that culture, in which responsibility, identity, stability, and opportunity were so bound up with kinship structures, Jesus’ pronouncement of a new family might elicit gasps. But it also can bring great joy to some, especially those followers who find themselves estranged from their own families of origin.”4

Jesus wider inclusion does not eliminate his family of origin. Adding more does not subtract anything. Sinner writes, “Jesus redraws the lines of family and belonging, saying that those who do God’s will are siblings and mother to him.”4

Our LGBTQ+ siblings are not the only community who have experienced rejection by their family or origin, or by people close to them. When one feels rejected one will seek out a different place. But when one feels rejected by those who are most expected to love them, the pain is deep. If a different place of acceptance is not found, lives are at stake. The Church, the place that attempts to represent the love of God cannot afford to fall short. Sadly it has not only fallen short, but has added to the pain. Today Jesus’ words tell us that whatever we think of as family, is larger than we think. In God’s family you are loved. You matter. You are beautiful. You are seen and understood.

Don Saliers, (yes, the father of Emily Saliers of the Indigo Girls) writes this: The harshness of Jesus’ reaction to his family, is to startle us into realizing just how radical is this notion of God’s family.” Jesus wasn’t just a political radical, he was a radical for love and acceptance. The kind of love that does not follow standard definitions.

“This text confronts the Church with a central reality of being a follower of Jesus’ way.”5 *All* of Jesus’ messages had the effect of enlarging the circle. Of spreading apart the tightly closed walls society often builds. If we are ever in doubt about Jesus’ intentions, we only need explore whichever path that will include more. This is Jesus’ gift. With Jesus, we are always given an ever widening view.

Let us pray….

12020, interview with Tony Alonso in conversation with Emily and Don Saliers discussing Don’s new book, “Themes and Variations.” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AVLZ4z_c464>

If you are interested in church music you might know Don Saliers. If you are interested in the musical group “Indigo Girls” you might know Emily Saliers. This father/daughter duo wrote a book in 2005 called “A Song to Sing, A Life to Live; Reflections on music as a spiritual practice,” about the Saturday night music sounds that Indigo Girls might be involved with, and Sunday morning music that Don Saliers might be involved with, and how much they have in common, and the human need that both types of music fill.

2Chelsea Harmon, CEP for June 9, 2024

3C. Clifton Black, 2024, Working Preacher commentary

4Matt Skinner, 2018, Working Preacher commentary:

5Don Saliers, Feasting on the Word commentary series, Year B, Volume 3.

For information about the Trevor Project:

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/explore/>

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/our-team/>

Add to prayers:

Roberta and Ken both have Covid. Probably exposed from Ken’s concert last Sunday. Both got Paxlovid, both are on the mend. Wanted to be added to the prayer list today.