

3rd Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 5B – June 9, 2024

New Song Episcopal Church – Coralville

Genesis 3:8-15; Psalm 130; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

“In League with the Devil” by Jennifer Lutz

A few weeks ago, I got one of those emails that I really shouldn't have opened. You know, one of those from a friend whose political leanings are far different than my own. The email directed me to a video featuring the devil complete with red body paint and horns on his head. He was seated at a conference table meeting with a group of activists who were, in his words, trying to “save the world” and get Joe Biden reelected as President.

In this parody, the activists, with their various causes of LGBTQ+ rights, climate change, fighting racism, and defending women's reproductive rights, genuinely believed that they were doing the right thing. However, while they thought that they were “saving the world,” the devil was encouraging and coaching them because, according to the devil, they were actually in league with him and successfully sending the world to hell.

I watched part of the video (I couldn't stomach it in its entirety) and then took a deep breath trying to release all the toxin it had generated within my body. I'm sure my friend had a laugh out of the video and thought it was terribly funny. Yet, it still really bothers me that he and roughly 50% of our fellow citizens view what I hold as good, wholesome, and of God to be horribly wrong, sinful, and of the devil.

In our gospel for today, the scribes from Jerusalem accuse Jesus of being in league with Beelzebul, the prince of darkness. They claim that it is by the power of Beelzebul that Jesus is casting out demons. Why would they say such a thing? It seems like a rather strong accusation to make. But if you look at what Jesus has been doing, much less what he's been saying in these first three chapters

of Mark, it may help explain how Jesus so ruffled their feathers.

As Jesus begins his ministry in Galilee, he says and does a number of things that are provocative and out of line, that would have drawn acute attention from the religious authorities of the day. Jesus heals a paralyzed man and in doing so, offers him the forgiveness of his sins. Everyone knows that God alone can forgive sins and the proper way to have your sins forgiven is to offer a sacrifice at the temple. Jesus and his disciples do not fast or follow the disciplines of other devout Jews. Instead, they eat, drink, and are merry and have a bad habit of hanging out with sinners, tax collectors and prostitutes.

Jesus does not keep the Sabbath restrictions as he should, but even declares that the Sabbath was made for humankind so he should be free to do what he sees as best. Jesus touches a leper and heals him of his skin disease. Then he sends the man to the priest to prove that the man is now well and that Jesus had the power to heal him. However, in healing this man, Jesus breaks all the rules. For one, he touches the leper, an unclean person, thus making himself ritually unclean. And again, he fails to show deference to the priests and the temple as the center of Jewish religious life.

From the scribes' standpoint, Jesus seems to be intentionally trampling on their tradition. He acts as if the temple & Torah, the very cornerstones of their religion, are, at best, in need of significant reinterpretation.

To this point, Jesus says, "No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins. Instead, one needs to put new wine into fresh, new wineskins."

From Jesus' standpoint, it is the scribes who have lost their way. In fastidiously keeping Torah and following Temple practice, they have lost sight of what lies at the heart of their Tradition: loving God with all your heart, mind, and strength and loving one's neighbor as yourself. Each time that Jesus clashes with

the scribes it is because he senses their lack of compassion for others. They follow the laws & practices of the tradition unswervingly, but do so to serve their own good; and then, are unwilling to bend those laws to offer compassion to others.

So, in our gospel passage today, all of this is coming to a head. So much so that Jesus' family shows up to whisk him away. His mother, brothers, and sisters come with ropes to restrain him, to take him home, to remove him from the public eye, for they believe that he's out of his mind.

The crowds are so large they're almost crushing him. He and the disciples don't even have time to eat. His disputes with the religious authorities are embarrassing them if not becoming dangerous as well.

When Jesus hears that his family is waiting for him outside, he uses the occasion to land another jarring statement: "Looking at those who sat around him, he says "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'" Now not only is Jesus reinterpreting the law, he is also redefining who is considered one's family.

Not only is one to care for their own flesh and blood, the members of their tribe, one also is to care for all those around them as members of their own family.

The way that Mark's gospel stacks these two stories together, Jesus' dispute with the scribes and his interaction with his family, also points to a deeper meaning beyond just looking at them separately. They fit together like a sandwich with the most important layer in the very center. The two slices of bread, so to speak, are Jesus' interaction with his family: them coming with ropes to restrain him and then, Jesus being told that they are standing outside waiting for him. The next layer in, the slices of meat, are Jesus' two interactions with the scribes: them accusing of him of being in league with Beelzebub and then Jesus accusing them of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. Then the cheese, the very center of the sandwich, and the central point Jesus is trying to make is the following:

“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.”

At first, this seems like a rather odd statement for Jesus to make. Yet the whole gospel of Mark can be characterized as this fight, this battle, between demonic forces & God. In Mark, Jesus is constantly casting out demons. Earlier in Mark, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as God’s champion in this fight; the one who is coming after John who is more powerful, stronger than he is.

Instead of Jesus’ family coming and tying him up, Jesus is the one who will tie up the strong man and take what’s in the strong man’s house as his own.

Through the power of God’s Spirit working within him, Jesus will bind the forces of evil. He will take all who belong to God from the grip of the strong man and restore us to our true identity and calling to be beloved children of God.

He will not do so with brute force as this metaphor seems to suggest.

Instead, he will bind the forces of evil with the power of his love.

A love that is willing to suffer, a love that forgives at all cost,
a love that is willing to ultimately give up his life.

As I think about this passage in our context as religious people in our day, I do so with trepidation. If Jesus should come among us, what would he say? What would he think needed to be bound or tied up?

Conversely, what would he want to set loose?

Where would he find our traditions and our ways of being church limiting and restrictive? In what ways would he challenge us to expand our circle of care? How would he push you and me to redefine who we consider family and who we are willing to sacrifice for?

These are questions to carry within us and to ponder both as individuals and as a community of faith.

Today, Jesus, the one more powerful than the strong man, walks with us.

With boldness, may we follow him in his way of love.