

Proper 5, Year B

June 7, 2015

Mark 3:20 (NRSV) and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. 21 When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." 22 And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beel'zebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." 23 And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? 24 If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. 25 And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. 26 And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 27 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. 28 "Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; 29 but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"-- 30 for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit." 31 Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. 32 A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." 33 And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" 34 And looking at those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! 35 Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Reflecting on our Gospel passage today, Lutheran professor David Lose asks: "Why is Jesus getting so much flack?"

"I mean, we're into just the third chapter in Mark and already he's got the religious leaders calling him a disciple of the Devil and other people calling him out of his mind. His own family is so afraid for him (and perhaps afraid *of* him!) that they come to restrain him. And all he's done so far is announce the coming kingdom of God, call some disciples, cast out a demon or two, and heal a bunch of sick people.

"Of course, one of those disciples was a tax collector, Jesus cast out the demon and did much of his healing work on the Sabbath, and he wasn't put off in the least when approached by a leper. Which means that Jesus' vision of the coming kingdom of God was rooted in a profound inclusivity that would let neither religious law nor social custom prevent him from reaching those in need with the abundant life he came to offer." (*...in the Meantime* blog) The requirements for citizenship in the Kingdom that Jesus has come to reveal have nothing to do with religious correctness or whom you are related to. "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother," Jesus simply says in today's Gospel.

When Fr. Chris Johnson came to speak with a number of us several weeks ago about Asset-Based Community Development (or ABCD), he led us in a little exercise to identify some of the strengths we at Christ Church have to offer our community. We all agreed that hospitality is one of our strengths! What we did not delve into, however, (because it was beyond the scope of that meeting) was what we define "hospitality" in the church to mean – and Professor Lose sees that as a very important question.

“[M]y experience,” Dr. Lose writes, “is that when most of us [in the church] think of hospitality, what we usually mean (or at least communicate through word and deed) is that hospitality is being patient and gracious with new folks until they learn the way **we** do things. But Jesus offers another vision of hospitality that is about meeting people where they are, accepting any and all who are interested in God’s kingdom, and responding to need no matter who is asking or when or how they ask.” (*ibid.*)

I find Dr. Lose’s comments both challenging and exciting: challenging, because I think there is some truth in saying that we often see hospitality in the church as “being patient and gracious with new folks until they learn the way **we** do things”; and exciting, because I think that we are moving in a right direction in the area of hospitality (one of our assets) as we begin to explore Asset-Based Community Development. And it has everything to do with today’s Gospel! For what Jesus is doing in today’s Gospel and throughout his ministry is establishing a community of people based not on blood relationship or adhering to the norms and customs of either society or religious establishment, but rather on participation in the community of life and love shared among himself, his Heavenly Father, and the Holy Spirit. I believe that this is what Jesus means when he says in our Gospel, “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” Jesus is calling into being a new community comprising those involved in the creating and redeeming work of God – whether or not people are related by blood or by formal membership in a church.

Now I know that a majority of you were not able to attend Dr. Johnson’s presentation several Saturdays ago, so let me just describe briefly what Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) is about. I will draw on a book I am currently reading by the Rev. Dr. Cameron Harder called, “*Discovering the Other: Asset-Based Approaches for Building Community Together*”.

Asset-Based Community Development starts with the principle that every church community has God-given gifts to share with the world, and we should *start* with these gifts. We always look at the glass as half-**full** rather than half-empty. Dr. Harder writes: “organizations change in the direction of their most frequently asked questions. Positive questions (such as ‘What’s working?’) create positive change; negative questions (such as ‘What’s wrong?’) generate blaming and discouragement.”

The other principle involved in Asset-Based Community Development is that we form community by first listening to others and getting to know them, their desires, their dreams, their gifts, their needs. “Churches that have life-transforming ministries,” writes Dr. Harder, “are churches that structure opportunities for people to know each other and to know their communities.” Almost three years ago, Chris Johnson was appointed priest in charge at St. Rafael’s Episcopal Church in Security, a community south of Colorado Springs in which many soldiers from Ft. Carson live. He got some of his parishioners together to offer a simple potluck meal one evening and ask some members of the Ft. Carson community to attend the meal and talk about their lives. That was the only agenda. As some of the young soldiers spoke about the challenges of raising a family while in the Army, one of the things they mentioned was that it was extremely difficult to find daycare for their children. The soldiers had to be in their barracks doing calisthenics at 6am, and there were no daycare facilities open that early.

Well, as it happens, Chris Johnson's wife had professional experience with child care, and other members of St. Rafael's had similar expertise. St. Rafael's members talked and met and prayed, and decided to take a great leap of faith and provide day care that opened at 5:30am for Ft. Carson soldier families. St. Rafael's borrowed a significant amount of money from the Colorado Episcopal Foundation to purchase a building next to the church which had formerly been a chiropractor's office and to have plans drawn up to convert the building to a day care facility called St. Rafael's Place. Church members tore down walls, tore up flooring, and are working to have that building opened by this coming November.

And it all came about because they wanted to get to know their neighbors.

Chris told us to start with connections we already have in our parish (there were already some soldiers who were members of St. Rafael's). And so, to get the ball rolling, we have invited some folk from Starpoint to share a potluck meal with us on Tuesday, June 30 at 6:30pm in our parish hall. As many of you know, we have people in our parish who have connections with Starpoint. The only agenda for the evening is to share a potluck meal and for us to listen to our Starpoint neighbors and get to know them better. As Dr. Harder wrote, "Churches that have life-transforming ministries are churches that structure opportunities for people to know each other and to know their communities." This is but a first yet important step in engaging in a type of hospitality that is not simply "being patient and gracious with new folks until they learn the way we do things."

But actually, that dinner meeting with Starpoint is not the *first* step we are taking using the ABCD principle of listening to our neighbors. For at our Adult Forum this morning, we listened to *another* community of people – young evangelical Christians, gay and lesbian – telling their stories. For some of us, it was the first time we have ever heard gay or lesbian Christians tell their experiences. I can tell you that the churches to which those young people belonged did **not** extend the kind of hospitality Jesus models and teaches, and yet these young people are extremely devoted to Jesus and to doing God's will as best they can in their lives, thereby meeting the qualifications Jesus mentions in our Gospel to be his brother and sister and mother. Our Adult Forum this morning was the first in a series of Forums over the next few weeks in which we will be discussing and listening to one another concerning one of the matters which our Episcopal General Convention will vote on when it convenes June 25, namely, the approval of a marriage liturgy which is inclusive of committed heterosexual and same-sex couples alike.

Dr. Lose concludes his reflections on today's Gospel passage by saying, "So maybe the question isn't, 'Why is *Jesus* getting so much flack?' But instead should be, 'Why aren't *we* getting **more**?' Why, that is, aren't we pushing the boundaries of what's socially and religiously acceptable in order to reach more folks with the always surprising, often upsetting, unimaginably gracious, and ridiculously inclusive love of Jesus? And if that *is* the kind of love we want to offer, we might go on to ask whether we are communicating that message in word and deed loudly and clearly, both inside our doors and outside to the community as well." (*ibid.*)

AMEN

