

Proper 5B 2018 Sermon

Mark 3:20-35

[Then Jesus went home.] The crowd came together again, so that Jesus and his disciples could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 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.

“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

In 1960, a children’s book was published that is still ranked as one of the top children’s books ever written.¹ *Are You My Mother?* is the story of a mother bird who is sitting on her egg when the egg begins to jump under her. Knowing that her baby will soon hatch and will be hungry, the mother bird flies off in search of food. But the baby bird gets out of the egg in record time, and not seeing his mother, he goes off in search of her. Not knowing what his mother looks like, the little bird approaches a kitten and asks, “Are you my mother?” And the bird continues to ask this question of a hen, a dog, a cow. What keeps up the tension in the story – and keeps our *attention* – is the universally deep, psychological and emotional ties which we, as *human* infants, have with **our** mothers. So we *cannot* stop reading this story about a baby’s separation from his mother until that tension is resolved and baby and mother are reunited.

The strength of the mother/child bond provides the background, the context for today’s Gospel story.

Now, in the first two-and-a-half chapters of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus is going all over the countryside teaching, healing the sick, and casting out demons. Along the way, he has gathered followers. He has angered the Jewish religious officials because he has healed on the sabbath (as we saw last week), and has eaten with

tax collectors, sinners, and other outcasts – crossing boundaries that “respectable” people of that day did not cross.

In *today’s* Gospel reading, Jesus returns to his hometown, and the crowds who had witnessed or heard of his miraculous healings and exorcisms enter the house where Jesus is and gather around him. And Mark tells us that Jesus’ family comes to “restrain” him (it’s a forceful word in the Greek text!), because people are saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

But who *are* the “people” who are saying this? Certainly *not* those who were being healed, or those who had demons cast out from them, or those tax collectors and other “sinners” and outcasts whom Jesus befriended and dined with. Rather, it was likely the **respectable** people, those who upheld the social structure and norms of that society and the letter of the Jewish Law – these were most likely the “people” who believed Jesus was acting in a deviant way, and therefore they spread the rumor that Jesus was “out of his mind.” And it seems that Jesus’ mother and siblings accept this assessment – for they come to *restrain* him.

The crowd sitting around Jesus in the house tells him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And Jesus asks, “Who *are* my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who are sitting around him, he says, “*Here* are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.” And with these words, Jesus redefines the very meaning of “family.”

Fr. John Shea points out the powerful symbolism of **where** people in this story are located. He writes, “[Jesus] has been told by the people sitting around him, those *inside* the house, ‘Your mother and your brothers and sisters are *outside*’ (v. 32). If people are *outside* the house, if they refuse to hear the teaching and engage the work of the kingdom, even though they are related by blood, they are *not* Jesus’ family. So Jesus’ question, ‘Who is my mother and my brothers?’ (v. 33) sets the stage for a radical consciousness shift.”²

And I would suggest that that shift in consciousness has to do with where it is we center our lives.

For those sitting around Jesus **in** the house, *their* center is Jesus and the kingdom of God he embodies, a kingdom ruled by the law of love. His mother and siblings, on the other hand, want Jesus to move his center *outside* the house, where *they* are, where family is defined by blood ties, and where the **culture’s** norms, constructs, and priorities hold sway. And if their determination to *restrain* Jesus from his “deviant” behavior is any indication, they must honestly believe that their *culture’s* center, with **its** norms of right and wrong, honor and shame, and maintaining boundaries of “in” and “out” between people, is the right, good, and even holy place to be.

And this is not unusual; I mean, is it not simply human nature to believe that the norms of our own society, nation, and culture are basically right? They may be the only norms we know! So we tend to center ourselves in our culture. But it is this very centering of oneself in one's culture that Jesus challenges – a challenge which St. Paul will later articulate when he writes to the Romans, “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God...” (12:2) And those who do the will of God are, by his own definition, Jesus' family.

Lutheran pastor and publisher Peter Marty tells of a time when the commuter train he was taking into Chicago's Union Station stopped about 500 yards short of the platform. Marty writes: “[M]ost of us on board took it in stride. We thought it was a momentary delay. It turned out to be 15 minutes long, which is the rough equivalent of eternity for a frantic commuter.

“A cheer went up in our car at around ten minutes. We thought we were finally moving. The joke was on us, however, when we realized that it was only the train *beside* ours that was moving—in the opposite direction. It is a strange sensation to discover you are going nowhere when everything in your brain is telling you otherwise. What tipped us off to our foolishness was a reference point: a large brick building that came into view after the other train had passed.”³

Peter Marty then reflects on that experience. He writes:

“All of us have reference points in our lives that provide us with our daily bearings. We might call these organizing centers, because they tend to possess generative qualities that fuel life, create meaning, and offer us a sense of place. Because these centers are fixed, they help us gain critical orientation in an often chaotic world.”⁴

I think Pastor Marty is right: Practically every one of us has a reference point in our life, whether we are conscious of it or not; a center around which we organize our thoughts, our beliefs, our perspectives, our judgments, our lives. And *where* our reference point is, *where* our **center** is, makes all the difference in the world. For it is from that center that we draw our energies, our motivations, our actions, our judgments, our attitudes toward the world and the people in it. *Without* a reference point, *without* a strong organizing center, life is shaky, insecure, and fearful. With a *distorted* reference point, which does not align with reality, or aligns with only one *aspect* of reality, life can become confusing or contentious – or both. Even worse is when we *ourselves* become our own reference point, and we expect the world to revolve around us.

In today's Gospel story, Jesus reveals **his** reference point, his center; and it is *not* his mother or siblings: it is God, and God's will. And from *that* reference point, everything else is relativized. “Family” is no longer determined only by blood ties, but by relationship to God and doing God's will. If you and I are to be

followers of Jesus, then God's kingdom, God's rule of love, must replace any other kingdom, nation, relationship, or culture at the center of our life.

And while we may agree with this statement in *theory* – that God and God's will are at the center of our lives – it is *difficult* to live out, to put into practice. For like that baby bird searching for his mother, we have strong, primal attachments to our biological mothers and families. Like the scribes and Pharisees, we have strong attachments to certain codes and standards of conduct. Like the “people” who say Jesus is out of his mind, we see as “deviant” those whose point of reference is different from our own. Like Adam and Eve in our Old Testament reading, we do things which we know are **not** God's will, and then we try to hide from God, pushing him to the periphery of our lives rather than the center, and creating a reference point based on the values of our own selfish desires or egos.

My friends, changing **our** reference point to **Jesus'** reference point, putting God and God's will at our center, is not a “one and done” decision. We must constantly, intentionally re-center ourselves, constantly reaffirm that God and God's will are our reference point. And we strengthen that reference point, that center, the same way we strengthen our muscles – by exercise and practice; though in this case, we are speaking of *spiritual* exercises and practices. Daily prayer and meditation, reading Scripture and spiritual books, attending Adult Forum, joining a Centering Prayer group (or yoga class with a spiritual component), serving others – and coming here each week to be transformed by word and sacrament in worship. All of these practices – and many others – help us keep our reference point, our center, in God and God's will.

The first verse of our final hymn today invites us to just such a re-centering of our lives in God. Here's the invitation:

Come and find the quiet center
 In the crowded life we lead,
 Find the room for hope to enter,
 Find the frame where we are freed:
 Clear the chaos and the clutter,
 Clear our eyes that we can see
 All the things that really matter,
 Be at peace, and simply be.⁵

As we strengthen our reference point, our center in God, our perspective, our consciousness will also change, and we will develop more and more the “mind of Christ.” And *then*, if a lost little bird (or a lost human being) comes up to us and asks, “Are you my mother?” we could honestly answer, “Why, yes! Yes, I am your mother, and your brother, and your sister.” For we all find our True Center in God.

AMEN

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Are_You_My_Mother%3F

² John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, p. 146

³ Peter Marty, “Point of Reference,” *The Christian Century*, March 2, 2016 issue

⁴ Marty, *ibid.*

⁵ Shirley Erena Murray, Words © 1992, 2005 Hope Publishing CCLI License #681246
<http://www.hopepublishing.com/html/main.isx?sitesec=40.2.1.0&hymnID=2366>