

Grace Episcopal Church
June 10, 2012

Sermon by Rev. Gloria Hopewell, D.Min
Text: Mark 3: 20-35

Poor Jesus. His public ministry has barely begun and already he's being bashed from every side. His family and friends fear that he has lost his mind. They've come to take him home before he does something to embarrass them. The delegation of religious authorities that has come all the way to Galilee from Jerusalem accuses him of being in league with Satan. And, as if that isn't enough, he's exhausted--no time to rest, no time to eat because the crowds just keep coming. Not that his growing popularity is bad. The word has gotten out about his healing, his miracles. It's just that the need is so great. It is endless.

But there is more getting out than news of the healings. And it is this that has drawn the attention of the scribes. And the family. It seems that Jesus heals on the Sabbath. He and his disciples don't observe the fasts as John's followers do. And he eats with tax collectors and other questionable folk. Worse yet, he chose a tax collector as one of his disciples! This apparent disregard for the Law that they observe so faithfully is just too much for the scribes. They need to do something about this upstart before it goes any further.

One way to do that is to convict him of healing by using magic. Magic was thought to be the work of the devil and was punished by banishment or even execution. And, after all, some of Jesus' healings involved exorcism--calling out the evil spirits that possessed some unfortunate folk. Many an itinerant healer was dealt with in this way.

But Jesus was having none of that. With just some basic common sense, he made short work of that argument. Why would someone in league with demonic powers want to exorcise demons? Why would demonic power cast itself out? That would eventually rob the demonic of all its power. It made no sense at all.

He then turned the tables and warned them about confusing what is good and what is evil--what is from God and the Holy Spirit and what is not. Jesus' healing acts and casting out of evil spirits have set people free, giving them back their lives. To call this demonic is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. An unforgivable sin. It is essentially cutting off from the very source of forgiveness and love.

This confusing of what is good and what is evil is not just a first century phenomenon. It is very much alive and well in our time. I can think of several examples--and there are many more.

There is Fred Phelps and the Westboro Baptist Church. I'm sure you've heard about them. This is a group based in Kansas and independent of any Baptist denominations that speaks against the belief that God loves all people. Phelps says that, in fact, God hates most of humanity and will send them all to Hell. God hates gays, God hates Jews, God hates Muslims, God hates Obama...and so on. God even hates America. The group spreads its hateful messages by demonstrating at public events and at churches that do not share its beliefs. Lately, it has been at funerals of celebrities like Whitney Houston and soldiers lost in battle. A law suit to prohibit their activity went all the way to the Supreme Court. The decision was in Westboro's favor--as hateful and hurtful as it is, the right to the freedom of speech is more important.

A number of other groups have stepped up as shields, forming lines between the demonstrators and the mourners. In an ironic twist, one of these recent groups at a military funeral was a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. They were there, they said, because they wanted Westboro to know that their right to free speech had been defended by these fallen soldiers.

That is a rather extreme example. Another in the news is that of the American nuns who are being subjected to stringent Vatican oversight. It has been determined that in their caring for and advocating for the poor and disenfranchised, they are not sufficiently following Catholic doctrine. The Vatican religious authorities believe that it is their doctrines and teachings that are good. The nuns believe they are disciples of Jesus, continuing his work, and that is good. So, in response to their reprimand, the nuns are planning a bus tour through nine states that will stop at homeless shelters, food pantries, and such to highlight their work. The tour begins on June 18 in Iowa. It will run through Illinois on its way to the ending place in Virginia.

This morning's gospel story is confusing and difficult, but for the writer of the Gospel of Mark, it is absolutely key to understanding what Jesus and his ministry were all about. This is not the gentle Jesus, meek and mild. But one who was single-minded in carrying out God's mission. One who was not hesitant to confront the powers that be. Neither the religious authorities nor Jesus' family and friends

got it.

Mark often used a literary technique that sandwiched one story within another. In today's Gospel, the difficult story was the filling of the sandwich—the turkey, and lettuce, and tomato and onions. The slices of bread were the mentions of Jesus' family. So we end with Jesus' mother, brothers and sisters waiting outside the house in Capernaum to speak to him. This is the more well known part where Jesus' seems to blow them off asking, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And declaring that it is those who do God's will who are his family.

This seems so harsh, doesn't it? Many take this to mean that Jesus is disrespecting families. To be sure, we do not find "family values" in Jesus' teachings. Not only did he set off on his own path to do his Father God's will, he called his disciples—and all who wanted to follow him—away from their families. It is the community that joins him in the common desire to follow God's will that become parents and brothers and sisters to him and to one another. He is not so much disrespecting the family as he is redefining it.

Even today we tend to call our church community a family. But we must be careful. Is it a family that seeks and follows God together? Or is it a family that just likes each other's company? Oh, to be sure, that is important—particularly in today's world, people are looking for a sense of belonging. The danger is that we become focused too much on our own group and do not reach out to embrace everyone who is seeking God and a welcoming community. The trouble is, we don't even realize we are doing it. We believe we are friendly and inviting. And, indeed, we often are. Still, there are those who find walking into a church for the first time—or the coffee hour—the most intimidating thing in the world. They fear standing all alone with their cups of coffee while everyone else seems to be connected. Sort of like a junior high school dance.

In the coming week, I challenge you to think about the first time you came to church. This church or another. Or visited a new church while on vacation. How did you feel? Were you anxious? Not knowing exactly what to do or what to expect? Did anyone reach out to you to make you feel at home? Or were you left to figure it out for yourself?

How would you have liked to be welcomed? How does this insight inform how you welcome others?

Yes, Jesus redefined the family. He made the circle bigger. Not just including those related by blood. Or by social station or education or even common interests. There was just one requirement. That they seek to do God's will together. May it be so.

Amen.