

Proper 5B 2021 Sermon

Mark 3:20-35

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 their book *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, social scientists Malina and Rohrbaugh note that “In antiquity, the extended family meant everything. It not only was the source of one’s status in the community but also functioned as the primary economic, religious, educational, and social network.”¹

In antiquity, family was everything.

We know, for instance, that in the Old Testament, to be a Jew meant to be a descendant of Abraham. Your family lineage was your identity and your destiny. To have “eternal life” in the Old Testament did not mean that your individual soul would go to heaven when you died; rather, it meant that your descendants, your lineage, your name, your family would never die out. Modern individualism as we know it today simply did not exist in ancient societies. Your identity was embedded in your family.

And in honor/shame-based societies, like those of Jesus’ day, if **one** member of a family brought dishonor upon himself, he brought dishonor on his whole family, also. So, when Jesus’ mother and brothers and sisters (we think that his father Joseph had died by this time) – when Jesus’ mother and siblings hear that people are saying he is *out of his mind*, this is humiliating, and thus a matter of family

honor. And so, in today's Gospel we hear that Jesus' family comes "to restrain him." Standing **outside** the house in which Jesus is teaching, they send to him and call him. Bible scholar John Shea notes that "standing outside" symbolizes the fact that Jesus' mother and his siblings "are not open to listening to Jesus' proclamation and teaching. Instead, they ask Jesus to come *out* of **his** house, to come back to them and their *conventional* way of thinking and acting. But things have gone too far. Jesus cannot go back home.

"In a very dramatic scene," Dr. Shea continues, "Jesus starts a **new** family... If [his mother and siblings] are *outside* the house, if they refuse to hear the teaching and engage the work of the kingdom [of God], even though they are related by blood, they are **not** Jesus' family. So Jesus' question, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' (v. 33) sets the stage for a radical consciousness shift..."²

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

For those who are sitting around Jesus in his house, *their* center is Jesus and the kingdom of God he teaches and embodies, a kingdom ruled by the law of love. His mother and siblings, on the other hand, want Jesus to move his center *outside*, where *they* are, where family is defined by blood ties and honor, and where the **culture's** norms, constructs, and priorities hold sway. As John Shea says, "The mind [that Jesus] is out of is the conventional societal mind that accepts the present social arrangements and their theological justifications."³ And if his family's 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, my friends, I don't believe this is unusual. Quite the opposite! 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! They are certainly the norms that our ego navigates as it relates to the world. So we all tend to center ourselves in our own culture and its values. But it is this very centering of oneself in one's culture and its ideologies 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, Jesus says in today's Gospel, are his *true* 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. The wait seemed interminable to commuters anxious to get to their destination. But then a cheer went up: the passengers thought they were finally moving – only to discover that it was really the train next to them that was moving, in the opposite direction. Dr. Marty writes: "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.”⁴

Reflecting on that experience later, Peter Marty wrote: “All of us have reference points in our lives that provide us with our daily bearings. We might call these organizing centers... [T]hey help us gain critical orientation in an often chaotic world.”⁵

My friends, each one of us has *some* reference point in our life, whether we are conscious of it or not; a center around which our thoughts, our beliefs, our perspectives, our judgments, our lives revolve. 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* – or more specifically, our ego selves – become our **own** reference point, and we expect the world to revolve around *us*, **our** family, **our** nation, or **our** group.

In today’s Gospel story, Jesus reveals **his** reference point, his center; and it is *not* his biological family, his mother or siblings: it is God, and God’s will. The first and Great Commandment, Jesus tells us, is, “You shall love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, *all* your soul, *all* your strength, and *all* your mind.” (Matt. 22:34-38) And from *that* reference point, everything else is relativized. “Family” is no longer determined by blood ties, but by devotion to God and doing God’s will. If you and I are to be followers of Jesus, then **God’s** kingdom, God’s reign of love and compassion, must replace every other kingdom, nation, relationship, culture, group, or ideology at the center of our life.

But it is *difficult* to **keep** that center, and to live our lives *from* that center, day by day. For, like the cultures of ancient times, we have strong, primal attachments to our biological families. Like the scribes and Pharisees of Jesus’ day, we have strong attachments to certain codes and standards of conduct, ideologies and beliefs. Like the “people” who say Jesus is out of his mind, we see as “deviant” those whose point of reference, whose center, is different from our own.

My friends, making *our* reference point **Jesus’** reference point, putting God and God’s will at our center, is not a “one and done” decision. We must daily, intentionally re-center ourselves, constantly reaffirm that God and **God’s** will are our reference point, and those who **do** God’s will are our principal family. 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* exercise and practice.

And so, today, I would like to offer one simple and short practice: the practice of reading a daily devotional, like our Episcopal devotional *Forward Day by Day* (available on the table in the back), or the daily email devotional by Richard Rohr (which is linked on our web site), or so many other good devotionals – some online, some in book or pamphlet form. For, you see, I am convinced that we human beings have an innate inclination toward, and desire for, *devotion*, which Webster’s defines as “The giving up (of oneself or one’s time, energy, etc.) to some purpose, activity, or person.” Devotion to someone or some thing gives our life meaning, gives us that “organizing center;” and if the primary *object* of our devotion isn’t **God**, it **will** be something or someone else. I believe there is truth in those recent articles in religious publications that say that a major reason there has been a decline in the number of people attending churches over the past few decades is that people have found *other* things to which they have devoted themselves, in which they have centered themselves: a human being or family, a nation, a political party or politician, wealth and riches, a sports team, entertainment, etc. And so, a simple practice of reading a daily devotional can help re-direct our innate inclination toward devotion to its proper recipient: God. And as our devotion is redirected toward God, so we become re-centered in God, God’s Kingdom, God’s will, God’s family. AMEN

¹ Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, © Augsburg Fortress, 1992, pp. 100-101

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

³ *Ibid.*, p. 143

⁴ Peter Marty, “Point of Reference,” *The Christian Century*, March 2, 2016 issue

⁵ Marty, *ibid.*