

Who is My Family?

A sermon by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
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Mark 3:20-35

Our Gospel text from the lectionary today is a passage from the 3rd chapter of Mark's Gospel. It shows Jesus, early in his ministry, both gathering crowds and facing opposition from the religious authorities. Listen for how his family reacts to this—and what he says in response to them.

Then he went home, and the crowd came together again, so that they 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.'

Our passage for today begins with Jesus **returning home**, to a house not far from where his family lives. His ministry is well underway and he's gathering crowds who are attracted to the power of how God is working through his words and actions. These hordes are pushing in so close to him that he and his disciples don't *even have room to eat*.

When his own **family** hears about this, they set out to restrain him. Not to tell him, *Hey, congratulations, you're off to a great start, keep up the good work. You're making an impact, stay the course, keep going where God is leading you.* No, instead they set out to restrain Jesus, to rein him in. The text gives us a reason why. They try to stop him because *people are saying*, "This guy, Jesus, is out of his mind."

Notice. **The passage says that they try to stop Jesus because of what "people" are saying.** I just love that. I had a ministerial colleague - actually he was my pastor for my last year and a half of college - who I ran into at a continuing education thing a few years ago. I asked him how things were going at his new church and he said, "It's going great. But we're doing some new things in my congregation and I've had a few people come to me saying, "Some people are saying...." Patrick told me, "I want to tell them, I looked up *some people* in the database and I can't find them under S or under P." I shot a glance over to Patrick and smirked. "Maybe you should try looking under their middle initial?"

So, **some people** were saying that Jesus was out of his mind. I can just hear his mother and brothers and sisters talking amongst themselves about that. *“What will people think? How will what **Jesus is doing** reflect on us? If he had just stayed in the carpentry business, you know, just like Joseph, we wouldn’t have this issue. What will happen to him? They are saying that he is out of his mind, and maybe he is. Perhaps if we pull him away, we can talk some sense into him, help him to tone it down a little. We’d better try to go rein him in before he gets into trouble.”*

The truth is that Jesus was well on his way to getting into trouble. He’d already run afoul of the religious authorities by this time. So they show up, the scribes do, from down in Jerusalem and they literally **demonize** him. This, by the way, is what people tend to do when they feel their way of life is being challenged. They say the one who does so is demonic. So the scribes say Jesus must be of the devil if he’s casting out demons—that he must be evil if he’s trying to do away with evil.

Leave aside that this makes no sense on its face. Leave aside that it feels a little like throwing something at him to see if it will stick. *Well, you don’t like that idea, how about this one? How about this one? Or this one?* Leave that aside and just think about what’s gotten them—both the scribes and the Pharisees—so upset in the first place.

Let’s take a whirlwind tour of the beginning of Jesus’ ministry in Mark.

He’s cast out a demon in the Capernaum synagogue, and people have marveled that he teaches as one with *authority, and not like the scribes*.

He’s touched a leper to heal him, something the Pharisees would **not** have done, *preferring, as they did, to remain ritually clean*.

He’s healed a paralytic man by telling him, “Your sins are forgiven” which gets the scribes’ ire up, because, *Who is he, after all, to say that? To forgive sins?* It just makes matters worse when the people who witness this healing are amazed and give glory to God.

He’s called a tax collector named Levi to come and follow him and eaten with a whole group of tax collectors and sinners at Levi’s house, which makes the Pharisees upset because he’s violating holiness codes about who it is appropriate to eat with.

He and his disciples have plucked heads of grain on the Sabbath, and when the Pharisees challenge him about it, he tells them that *he himself* is Lord of the Sabbath.

As if to prove that very point, he goes on to heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath. But **only after asking the Pharisees** if it is lawful to do good and save life on the Sabbath and hearing them say absolutely nothing in response. They look *directly at this* man in need of healing and grace and **they say nothing**. As if they care not a whit for the man’s disease, but only for their particular interpretation of the law. Then Jesus heals the man, on the Sabbath, for God’s sake.

That’s when, that’s when, according to Mark’s Gospel, the Pharisees and the Herodians start plotting together to destroy Jesus.

Now you need to understand that the Pharisees and the Herodians were **mighty strange bedfellows**. The Pharisees were all about strict observance to the religious law in the face of the Roman Empire’s influence, and the Herodians were all about collaborating with Rome, loosening norms and trying to stay in good with the Roman Empire. Herod was a puppet king and the Pharisees would have despised him and those who supported him for it.

Do you get the picture? The Pharisees *could not stand* the Herodians. For them to conspire together with Herod's people against Jesus would have gone against their moral code, their very integrity, but they did it.

Why? That's my question. Why? Well, I suspect it had something to do with Jesus challenging their worldview, reaching out to people they would rather have ignored and extending God's grace and healing to them. People troubled by inner demons, lepers who would have been social outcasts, tax collectors and sinners, men and women with withered hands and spirits, **and that's all before he got into healing people who were outside of their religion.** So the religious insiders said he had a demon and was in league with demons, as if setting people free from torment and self-hatred and disease and abuse and exclusion were something evil rather than something to be celebrated. He was challenging their very way of life.

About a week and a half ago, David Brooks wrote a marvelous op-ed piece in the *New York Times* titled *The Strange Failure of the Educated Elite*. In it, he takes on the very notion of meritocracy, the boomer idea that people ascend to their place in society based solely on hard work and merit, not their hereditary status. He says that one problem is that it turns out that *members of the educated class use their intellectual, financial, and social advantages to pass down privilege to their children, which creates an elite that is insulated from the rest of society.*

But, Brooks writes, "The real problem with modern meritocracy can be found in the ideology of meritocracy itself. It is a system based on the maximization of individual talent, and that system unwittingly encourages several ruinous beliefs, including, among other things: **an exaggerated faith in intelligence**, that fails to recognize that great harm has been caused over the last fifty years by some very intelligent people who didn't care about the civic consequences of their actions; a **misplaced faith in autonomy**, which imagines that individuals are on a solitary and unencumbered journey through life towards success instead of being part of and accountable to communities; a **misplaced notion of the self** in which self-concept is based on personal achievement and not on character; and a **view of institutions** which sees them as something to *pass through* on the way to individual success and not as something to adapt and refine as a means for protecting and working toward the common good.

Now to pretend that there is a direct line from 21st century notions of meritocracy all the way back to first century scribes and Pharisees would be overstating the case. But I do think that what zings them and us, if we're honest, I think what zings the Pharisees and scribes and us about Jesus is that he calls them to a larger vision, a real sense of the common good—including the good of people who are not like them, who do not worship like they do, who do not observe religious laws like they do. He's calling them to not forget the Spirit of the law in their observance of the letter of it. He's calling them to consider the consequences of their actions and to move beyond any sort of spiritual meritocracy into what I would call a radical grace-ocracy. I think what bugs the scribes and the Pharisees about Jesus is that he is calling them to a sense of connection to people to whom they'd rather not feel connected, and to a vision of family that is larger than what they would have imagined.

That larger vision of family is what they needed—and what we need, too.

So when Jesus' biological family—his mother and brothers and sisters—finally get to the house where he is, when they are standing outside, and they manage to get a message in to him that they want to see and speak to him, he looks around at everyone else and says, "Who are my mother? And my brothers and my sisters? The ones who do the will of God, they are my mother, and

brothers, and sisters.” In other words, he’s telling them, *Don’t hinder me from reaching out to people in need. Remember that living in faith is about more than just us and our individual families—it is about caring for the larger human family.*

So today we recognize our graduates. I’ll be honest that Brooks’ op-ed piece kind of got in my kitchen a little bit when he chided members of the educated elite for giving their young the book, *Oh, the Places You’ll Go*, as if the whole message of the book is about being a solitary, individual “you” moving through life towards success. Okay, I looked at the book again, and then I read it again, and one more time over, and it may lean in that direction, sure. But inside the covers of those books that we are giving to our high school graduates, there are words of encouragement and appreciation and support from members of this congregation, people who have supported our graduates throughout their young lives, and been confirmation mentors and supporters and fellow journeyers.

The truth is, we never travel on our own—even when we feel most isolated and despairing, by the way, did you get that, *even when we feel most isolated and despairing*—we never travel on our own. We are part of a larger family of people who care about us whether we can allow ourselves to feel the truth of that or not. Do not forget that. It is important to say, this week, in light of the suicides of Kate and Anthony and so many others who did not make the national news. Do not forget that we are connected.

Who are my mother, and brothers and sisters?

This week, our International Mission Committee voted to send \$1,000 of relief money to Guatemala to help in the aftermath of the volcano there.

Who are my mother, and my brother, and my sisters?

One of the grants from our Endowment this year was to provide reading material in Spanish in the jail’s waiting area for the children and families of Spanish-speaking inmates in Fairfax County. Who are my parents and my siblings?

Yesterday a group of Immanuelites went and walked in the Pride parade in DC. I love the post I saw on many people’s walls this week. It said, in rainbow colors, *For anyone who will have to deal with unsupportive family this Pride month. Congratulations, I’m your family now. Stay hydrated, eat your veggies and support yourself. I am proud of you.*

Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters? It’s a great question to ask when parents are being separated from their children and children are being separated from their parents on the borders of our country.

Who are my mother and my brothers and my sisters?

Well, you know, the litany could go on and on and on.

Here’s the good news: Our notions of family are always a little too small. And Jesus is always pushing us beyond those boundaries and borders into compassion and a grace that is not based on some sort of merit, because grace that is based on merit is really not grace at all.

Thanks be to God for that grace extended to us. In Jesus’ name. *Amen.*