

Sunday, June 6, 2021
Second Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 5 (Year B)

Genesis 3.8-15; Mark 3.20-35

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregorystlongbeach/videos/245227590700783>

(Sermon begins at about 17:05)

“Invitation to Deeper Relationship”

It’s early in Jesus’ public ministry and he’s already going 90 miles a minute. It is obvious from scriptural accounts that he was keeping a fast-paced schedule just to keep up with the demands on his time. He’s barely started and has already outwitted Satan in the wilderness, cast out a couple of demons, healed Simon Peter’s mother-in-law, gone on a preaching and teaching tour throughout Galilee, cleansed a leper, healed a paralytic and a man with a withered hand, and healed countless others with all sorts of diseases and infirmities. And he even found time for administrative details like appointing the Twelve as his inner circle and righthand men. And all this activity has not gone unnoticed. In the short time he has been at it, Jesus has attracted quite a bit of attention. Wherever Jesus went, people flocked to see him. Some coming from great distances. The crowds were such that “he could no longer go into a town openly” (Mk 1.45). Not only had he attracted the attention of the people of Galilee, but also from the temple authorities in Jerusalem, who come to Galilee to check out for themselves what this Jesus is all about.

Rather than try to see the good in what Jesus is doing—healing, casting out demons, teaching, and preaching—these temple authorities instantly start hurling insults. They start leveling charges that he is obviously possessed by demons. And not just any demon. They claim he is possessed by Beelzebul, chief of the demons. Synonymous with Satan. They are obviously trying to discredit Jesus. Perhaps because he was able to reach the people in a way the religious establishment had not been able to. Perhaps because he was able to give them what they wanted. What they needed. Not pontificating about archaic religious laws and the constant harping about the need to maintain religious purity. No, Jesus gave them something real, something tangible. He met them where they were. He gave them physical healing. He gave them forgiveness. He gave them compassion. He gave them practical teachings. And perhaps most importantly, he gave them hope. He didn’t look down on them and treat them as lesser, as the temple authorities did.

So yeah. The temple authorities could not compete. And they were scared. Scared that Jesus would show them up. That he would out do them. That the people might even stop following them and start following Jesus. Too late for that. Jesus did more for the people in the short time he had been ministering than they had done for the people in centuries. So, they resorted to that age old tactic: fake news. (And you thought that was the product of our own time.)

As if things couldn’t get more difficult or awkward for Jesus, in amongst all of this, his family shows up. They are concerned, as well, but for different reasons. People are saying “He has gone out of his mind” (Mk 3.21). We are told that his family came, seeking to restrain him. We are not sure what the family’s specific concern is. Presumably to get him out of a potentially threatening situation. Or possibly because they are concerned that he is overworking himself.

Regardless of the reasons behind their concerns, they should know by now, Jesus can take care of himself.

So here we have Jesus having to contend with three crowds. Those seeking healing and teaching—the people of Galilee. Those seeking to discredit him—the temple authorities. And those seeking to get him to take better care of himself—his family. And who do you think is going to prevail? It is apparent from Jesus' responses that he really doesn't care what the temple authorities think. He basically tells them that their allegations are ludicrous: "How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand" (Mk 3.23b-24). He follows up with: "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" (Mk 3.28-29). Jesus is obviously not possessed by Satan but rather is motivated—possessed, if you will—by the Holy Spirit. Motivated to do God's work of bringing about healing and wholeness. To imply that Jesus was possessed by an evil spirit instead would be to deny the validity of God's work in the world, which would be blasphemous. In this comment, we possibly see a backhanded slap at the temple authorities, that they don't know what they are talking about and don't truly understand what God's will is or what doing it even looks like.

And in response to news that his family was there, Jesus essentially blows them off, as well: "'Who are my mother and my brothers?' And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers!'" (Mk 3.33-34). While appearing to shift attention from the temple authorities to the issue of his family's attempted intervention, Jesus' comments are a continuation of his criticism of the temple authorities. For he wraps up his comment by saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mk 3.35). As one commentator notes, "Those who seek to follow Jesus, then, can only do so by taking part in this life-giving mission as well. His 'family' will be constituted not by those who seek to 'restrain' his healing work, he insists, but rather by 'whoever does the will of God' (Mark 3:21,35). Neither kinship nor doctrine will do: what matters most is participating in God's mission of healing, hope, and restoration."¹ In his comments about who are his true family, Jesus makes it clear that, while he may love his birth family, he defines family by broader criteria: those who do God's work. And that he does not particularly view the temple authorities as being in that category. For Jesus, it is all about being in partnership. About us being in partnership with God in carrying out the work that is closest to God's heart.

The events conveyed in our Gospel reading present one approach to responding to God's invitation to be in partnership. The preferred approach. By contrast, we see the complete opposite approach in our first reading from Genesis. Just to set the stage, this is in the early days after the creation of humanity. After God created Adam, he told him "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen 2.16b-17). And what happened? The serpent tricked Eve into eating of the tree, and she convinced Adam to do likewise. Today's story picks up just after the deed has been done—after Adam and Eve eat of the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve are hiding from God because of what they have done—because they broke the one rule God established for them. Which just makes matters worse. God asks, "Where are you?" As various scholars have pointed out, the question isn't for God's benefit, since God knows very well where they are. Rather, the question is for Adam and Eve's benefit. This is about God

giving Adam and Eve an opportunity to take responsibility and to repent of what they have done.² The implication being that if they admit what they have done, if they take responsibility, God will go easy on them.

As we see, that did not go as God had hoped. Adam and Eve do not take responsibility. Instead, they resort to finger pointing. Adam blames both God and Eve: “The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit from the tree” (Gen 3.12). So, it’s Eve’s fault because she gave the fruit to Adam. And it’s God’s fault for having created Eve in the first place. Then, Eve seeks to shift the blame: “The serpent tricked me” (Gen 3.13). The result? By failing to take responsibility for what they have done, they further alienate themselves from God. And they succeed in alienating themselves from each other. Humanity turned away from its Creator, but also turned away from its true identity as beloved of God. A turning away that is made all the more tangible by the fact that they will be cast out of the Garden and forced to fend for themselves as punishment for what they have done. But at least this is not a death sentence, as God originally said would happen if they did indeed break that one rule. This sets the stage for the development of our species—immediately at odds with God and ourselves.

But as we see in our Gospel reading for today, Jesus offers humanity a way to heal our relationship with God. He offers a way to be reconciled with God. He offers a way to live into our true identity. And in so doing, he also offers a way to be reconciled with one another.

Jesus’ acts of healing are more than about bringing physical health and wholeness to the individual. They are also about bringing health and wholeness to the individual’s relationship with God. They are about bringing health and wholeness to our relationships with one another. And in so doing, they are about bringing health and wholeness to the individual’s relationship with oneself. Jesus’ actions are also about healing that which separates us from God so that we might live into the fullness of who God created us to be.

But Jesus doesn’t just provide healing and then send us on our way. Once healed, he offers a way to live into the fullness of who we are as beloved of God. “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.’” He invites us into even deeper relationship. Not just as workers for God. Not just as friends of God. But as family. He invites us to be co-creators with God in the sacred work of restoring and reconciling the strained relationship between God and humanity that has existed from the beginning. Inviting us back into the partnership between God and humanity that was intended for us from the beginning of Creation.

The purpose of the Church, from those early days of Jesus’ ministry, has been about living into that partnership. About continuing Christ’s work of healing and teaching, his work of bringing health and wholeness to a broken and hurting world. About being a community of hope and hospitality in the midst of a broken and hurting world. That is what we are called to do, now more than ever.

Who are Jesus’ mother and brothers? Here—in this place, be it physical or online—you are Jesus’ brothers and sisters and mother.

¹ “Sin and Salvation: SALT’s Lectionary Commentary for Second Week after Pentecost,” SALT, June 1, 2021. <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-third-week-after-pentecost>.

² Ibid.