

Sermon , June 9, 2024
Mark 3:20-35

“The Brothers and sisters of Christ”

Jesus had just chosen his apostles, and now journeyed home. Although it was quite early in his ministry, he had already begun to draw crowds, and not all of them held him in great esteem. Although most people in his hometown had known him from childhood as the son of the local carpenter, Joseph, they were astounded by the new direction he was now moving in, and many thought he had gone insane. Having heard of this radical new rabbi that was causing quite a stir, a group of scribes came down from Jerusalem, and were not the least bit thrilled with what they found. The scribes, like the Pharisees, were lawyers, but unlike the Pharisees, who were antagonistic towards Jesus, the scribes took things a little further saying that Jesus was obviously under the influence of Beelzebul, the ruler of demons.

Beelzebul was originally an ancient Syrian god that somehow became a figure of evil within the Hebrew culture. His name literally means, “lord of the house”. Later in the fourth century, when the Bible was first translated into Latin the name was changed to Beelzebub, which means, “ lord of the flies”, and was just another name for the devil.

Of course, Jesus takes great exception to this accusation, and asks, “ How can Satan cast out Satan?” Remember that he had just healed the man with the withered hand, and had healed others in the previous chapter, and this was a time that lacked the medical knowledge that we have today, and most illnesses, both physical and mental , were considered the work of demons. (I’ve recently been reading a biography of Francis of Assisi , and in the Medieval era illnesses, such as leprosy, were seen as divine punishment for great sin.) But Jesus is asking how he can be casting out demons if he, himself, is under the influence of the ruler of the demons!

He follows this up by asking how a house divided can stand. We may recognize that Abe Lincoln brought this up point in a famous speech he delivered in 1858, referring to the question of whether the union can last half free and half slave. Sam Houston of Texas had also raised this question in a speech he gave in 1830. And, may I say, that if we take into consideration that our country today is probably the most divided it has been at least from the era of the war in Vietnam, it is a question very pertinent to our own survival as a country!

But, again, Jesus is asking how it would be possible to do what he does if he, himself, was possessed of a demon.

Jesus continues by saying, “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”. It certainly is a true blessing to know that in and through the grace of God we are forgiven of past wrongs. And in the course of my ministry, I have known those who feel the burden of guilt for things they have said or done in their lives, and we need look no farther than this statement to accept the fact that God’s love for us is so far reaching. After all, the word ‘gospel’ means ‘good news’, and that is a large part of it. But what of this statement about blaspheming the Holy Spirit? Again, I have known people who upon hearing this, have wondered what it means, and could it be that they have committed an unforgivable sin without even knowing it? Well, Jesus tells us what it means in verse 30. He says, “for they had said “ He has an unclean spirit”. The scribes had said that Jesus was under the influence of Beelzebul. In other words, they are insinuating that the spirit within Jesus ,through which he heals ,is evil.

But the Spirit within Jesus is holy, therefore the unforgivable sin is calling that Spirit evil - and I have never known anyone who has ever confessed to have committed that sin.

Now, in the final portion of our reading Jesus’ mother and brothers have appeared, and the question of who qualifies as members of his family comes up. First, let me say that there has been controversy as to whether or not Jesus had brothers. According to Roman Catholic doctrine Mary continued to maintain her virginity throughout her life, and, therefore, could not have had more children - and some have suggested that the brothers mentioned here were actually half-brothers from a previous marriage of Joseph’s. Personally, I think that’s a bit of a stretch, and there is no problem with Mary having given birth to others. And it is a generally accepted fact that Jesus had a brother named James, who went on to become an important leader in the first church in Jerusalem.

But the point that Jesus is making is that family is more than a matter of blood, or DNA. It is a matter of faith and a willingness to submit to the will of God. When we are willing to do that, we become brother and sister to Jesus, and that is really great that we need not think of him as some distant, disembodied figure, but ,instead, that we have a close and intimate relationship with him as we journey on in our spiritual lives. And the other real cool part of that is that through our embrace of him as the Christ we also become brother and sister to one another! Amen.

Let us pray: Great and loving Spirit, you haven't us another beautiful day, and for that we are most grateful. Be our guide throughout this day, and in all the days to come, that we may be faithful to you in all that we say and do. You know that we are not always as faithful as we could be and are therefore blessed by the unconditional nature of your love. May your Son Jesus , our brother, lead us as we strive to bear witness to that love to others, and especially to those who are sick, those who are poor, marginalized, or victims of bigotry and oppression. As we move forward as individuals, and as a congregation, we ask that your Holy Spirit inspire us to lead lives grounded in faith, hope, and love. Continue to draw us together as sisters and brothers in Christ and help us to be the church you desire us to be. Help us to see beyond boundaries and strengthen our familial ties with all people and the whole of your Creation...Amen.