

FAMILIES OF CHOICE: WHEN LOVE IS LOVE

YEAR B, Proper 5; Mark 3:20-35

In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer. Amen.

Good Morning.

We have had a busy Spring here at Christ Church – a season of celebration - the beautiful celebration of our fiery Pentecost, then Trinity Sunday, the celebration last week of our 150th anniversary and the wrap up of our Sunday school year, the Bishop’s visitation and pot luck gathering this past Wednesday. We have been clearly blessed with an abundance of talent, time, and treasure. And in all of this, I have been reminded of the power of discipleship – and how we have been living into our baptismal vow to proclaim by word and example the Good news of God in Christ. Proclamation through celebration is especially joyous – and through it we can also feed our own spirits – fortifying ourselves for the continued journey with Christ: a journey which we know is not always light and joyful.

In fact, our gospel today brings us right back into that reality. In the gospel reading from Mark today we are reminded that along with the joy, there are challenges and fears – moments when we are held back or when we hold ourselves back - from the recognition of Christ and the community of love that surrounds us.

Let’s take a look at the Gospel story today:

We come upon Jesus with the twelve being so surrounded by eager crowds pressing on them, that they cannot even eat. And amidst the crowds we find the elite Scribes who challenge and judge Jesus, in addition to Jesus’ own family of origin who are clearly, at least, concerned that Jesus has somehow “lost his mind”.

This narrative reveals two familiar story lines that resound throughout the gospels: 1: the rejection of Jesus by family and relatives; and 2. The charge that he is some kind of sorcerer who is possessed by demons. In today’s gospel, Mark’s depiction of this scene cleverly integrates these story lines in order to emphasize two important repeated themes: the first theme is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah - and the second theme concerns what it means to be a disciple. Or as scholars refer to these themes – the themes of Christology and Discipleship.

All of this is obvious because of the placement of this story in the book of Mark - it follows the choosing of the Twelve disciples. And now here we find ourselves witness to a relatively chaotic scene in the thick of Jesus’ ministry – When the crowd gathers with enough intensity that Jesus and the twelve were unable to eat. And I can only imagine that the Twelve were also stunned to observe the scene about them... for here amidst his ministry and the crowd of followers, we learn that Jesus’ family decides to launch a full-blown intervention – to retrieve him – for they believe, as do the Scribes in attendance, that he has “gone out of his mind”. It may even be that his biological family wishes to save him from the judgement of these religious authorities by intervening, perhaps assuming that they know what is best for their own flesh and blood. (sound familiar?)

Yet, Mark uses this opportunity to highlight that Jesus is in fact more than solely human. For, inserted within this narrative about family and discipleship – is an examination of Jesus’ ministry and the challenge by the Scribes who suspect that his power comes from some evil source - and that he is possessed by demons. Jesus refutes this with the parable about the plundering of a strong man’s house - implying that Jesus himself has plundered the House of Evil, thereby demonstrating that the power of God is at work through him.

Mark’s clever juxtaposition of narratives about Jesus as Christ and what it means to be a disciple highlights the complexity of the path of Christianity. Not only are we struggling to understand what it means to *follow* Jesus, but we are also simultaneously trying to understand *who Jesus really is*. It was complicated then. It is complicated now. And it’s nice to know that we are not the only ones who have faced these questions! Think of all the characters in this one story – there were the disciples – committed and devout followers of Jesus; the crowds of believers which included those in need, longing for healing and connection; there was the family of origin – fearful and clamoring to intervene; and the Scribes – who were the threatened powerful, always challenging and questioning. Now take a moment to consider our own Christian journeys. Perhaps we can see ourselves in this story – sometimes we may be the committed faithful, or perhaps we are the believer in need, maybe we identify with the fearful worrier, and I am sure there are time when we are the challengers and doubters. It’s a story we can relate to – I am betting we are in that crowd somewhere!

But Mark does not leave us struggling in the crowd... Mark returns us to the question of discipleship – and is so doing, we are centered. We are reminded of the purpose and blessings of our Christian journey. There is good news in this reading today. And it is found in a rather discomfiting rhetorical question from Jesus’: “Who are my mother and my brothers?” (he says) 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 these few words, Jesus denies his biological family the ability to seize upon him and halt his ministry. Jesus redefines his family, and his community. In these words, Jesus tells his followers that the power of discipleship far outweighs the power of biology and origin.

Suddenly amidst the mayhem of that crowd – all of the negative energy from the judgmental Scribes and the worried family – has been dispersed. Jesus has proclaimed the Good News of God– he has reminded his followers that what matters most is the journey with God, and the determination to do God’s will. It suddenly seems somehow simple – and yet it’s deeply profound. “Here is my family,” says Jesus, “and my family is comprised of those who do the will of God.” And in the Jewish tradition of the time, the will of God was well known: love your God and your neighbor as yourself.

Imagine his disciples and the crowd hearing these words: his disciples who had left their own biological families to follow Jesus; and the multitudes surrounding them: the folks in need, some desperate for healing, some possibly longing for a sense of “family” themselves. As disturbing as it might be to read a story where Jesus seems to deny his biological family, we must remember how his words may have been a healing balm for many there that day.

In fact, I am reminded of the need for such a broad view of family in our time today – and how very healing that view can be. So much that is happening in the world with families today – so many families being torn apart by ignorance, violence, and fear: immigrant families, families of color, LGBTQ families. Some of you may be aware that in the LGBTQ community, we

have a phrase: “family of choice”. This phrase refers to families that are chosen and intentionally formed by those who have experienced expulsion and hatred from their own families of origin. Folks who have suffered deeply and yet have gone on to find the love and support of a group individuals they identify as family. For folks who have been so terribly hurt and abandoned, this new-found, strong, unconditional familial love is a treasured gift. Just this year, in fact, the Vermont legislature passed a law that redefines the legal definition of “parent” in order to recognize parental rights in all sorts of families – both biological families and families of choice. It is a beautiful testament to Vermont’s acknowledgement that *love is love is love* and that families come in all shapes and sizes. Our law now recognizes that parents are same-gender couples, step-parents, married or never married, guardian grand-parents, adoptive parents and on and on. What a great moment for us. I wonder what Jesus might say? Here we are in June 2018 – this is known as Pride month for the LGBTQ community. It is the month set aside to proclaim and celebrate that love is love regardless of sexuality or gender-identity. And we now have legislation that clarifies that families are defined by love, not solely by biology.

It is no small thing – Jesus redefined family when he acknowledged that love wins. Jesus acknowledged that those who do the will of God are family. And as 21st century Christians, we know the will of God to be to LOVE – that is, to LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength and to love your neighbor as yourself – and likewise the New Commandment: to love others as Christ loved us – and **that** we *know* is unconditional, ground breaking, worry shaking, fearless, inclusive and radical love.

Here in our Christ Church community we have also recently been taking time to examine our own racial biases and to look for ways to affect racial justice in our community. (In fact, next week we’ll be hearing from our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry on this very topic) and I think this scripture lesson today is a very nice compliment to this conversation we have been having. For in this scripture we are encouraged to break out of the usual thinking about who is **in** our “family” and who is **out**. Jesus’ acknowledgment of the breadth of our community calls us to look **up and out** - to see the diversity around us and find our community in beloved solidarity. In solidarity of purpose, solidarity of belief in justice and in the dignity of every human being. It is an encouragement to find community NOT in only people who look like us or think like us – but to find community amongst the diversity of the crowd. Jesus is encouraging us to break away from old definitions that might keep us isolated or single-minded and embrace the community which opens all hearts. We are to look beyond what we have seen only as our family of origin and lift our eyes to the horizon - standing side by side – and marching together in Love – with a capital “L”. It is connection and commitment. We are called to let go of the fear that binds us – fear that keeps us stuck in worry or fear that keeps us feeling threatened – and move toward Love, side by side. That is true discipleship – and it is the miraculous, liberating and healing message of Jesus’ ministry.

In closing – let me leave you with a quote from MLK, Jr: “But the end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. It is this type of understanding goodwill that will transform the deep gloom of the old age into the exuberant gladness of the new age. It is this love which will bring about miracles in the hearts of [all people].”

And as we here at Christ Church proclaim – it is *this love* that will set our hearts on fire!

Thanks be to God.
Amen.