

Epworth Chapel on the Green  
June 10, 2018  
Pentecost 3  
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 3:1-21  
Psalm 130  
2 Corinthians 4:7-18  
Mark 3:20-35

Our Gospel lesson this morning finds Jesus in the midst of a successful preaching tour early in his ministry. He has been preaching to folks that the Reign of God is at hand, and he has been *demonstrating* what that looks like by healing and liberating persons from anything that keeps them from being fully human.

Just prior to this incident in our Gospel the crowds have become so vast that Jesus has to tell his disciples to have a small boat ready, and he has to teach from the boat in order to prevent being mobbed by the people. And in our text this morning, Jesus and the disciples have entered a house, and the crowd is so obtrusive that Jesus and his disciples cannot even eat.

One of the key themes that Mark develops in his Gospel is how people mistake Jesus' identity. (Actually, this is a very modern problem as well.) The incident here in this house brings Jesus' identity front and center.

Jesus' sudden and meteoric popularity has his family concerned about him, thinking that perhaps he has become a bit "unbalanced." And in the first century, it was quite common to link mental illness or insanity with demonic possession.

Jesus' family doesn't do this, but the religious authorities who've come from Jerusalem *do*. They are the ones who really get what Jesus is all about "wrong." When confronted with the evidence of his healings and his miracle working power, they have the audacity to say: "He is possessed by Satan, the prince of demons. That's where he gets his power to cast out demons."

Jesus calls them over and asks them: "How can Satan cast out Satan? A kingdom divided by civil war will collapse."

And then, with our Old Testament lesson from Genesis in view, Jesus takes it a step further. He asks the religious leaders: "Who is powerful enough to enter the house of a strong man like Satan and plunder his goods? Only someone even stronger – someone who could tie him up and then plunder his house."

In saying this, Jesus is revealing himself as the One promised in our reading from Genesis. He is the seed of the woman who has come to crush the head of the demonic serpent. And Mark's Gospel is a lengthy commentary on this very thing. Mark's Jesus is the Jesus who has come to bind the strong man (the devil) and free those who are bound by him. Jesus comes to these religious leaders – who are descendents of Abraham – and shows them a way of relating to God that takes them back to the *true spirit and intent* of their religion.

But the religious leaders make the ultimate mistake here. In an act of true insanity, they attribute the work of the Holy Spirit to Satan. This prompts Jesus to

say something that scared the daylights out of me as a young Christian, when he says: “All sin and blasphemy can be forgiven, but anyone who blasphemes the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven” (vv. 28-29).

As a young Christian, I was never quite certain what the “unpardonable sin” was, but I lived with fear that I might commit it.

But Jesus makes it pretty clear here. Jesus is not saying that there are limits to the mercy of God. Rather, the only sin that cannot ultimately be forgiven is the deliberate refusal to accept the mercy and grace of God that comes to us in the Holy Spirit. The only thing that will ultimately damn any of us is our refusal to acknowledge the authentic work of the Holy Spirit in our lives, and our refusal to accept His gracious overtures.

The love of God that Jesus brings into this world is so radical, so profound, that folks don't know what to do with it. They didn't *then*, and they don't *today*. The love of God that appears in Jesus is so intent on invading and healing the brokenness of our lives that it confounds our conventional wisdom. It transcends reason. And it makes us very uncomfortable. And so the prevailing response to such love is often to reject the One who embodies it, and even (dare I say) to *demonize* it.

On this third Sunday after Pentecost, the person and ministry of Christ continues to confound us, as it has people for centuries. But let us pray for grace,

**lest we confuse the work of the Holy Spirit with the spirit and power of the "strong man," whom Jesus has come to bind and to defeat.** That would be a mistake of incalculable proportions.

As we come to the table this morning, come with gratitude for the grace Christ offers you here. It is grace that has the power to touch you, to heal you, to deliver you from every force that tries to oppress you in your life.

The world will tell you that you're *insane* to believe this. On the other hand, perhaps the real insanity is *not to believe this*.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.