

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 10, 2012
Pentecost 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Genesis 3:1-21
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 4:13-18
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 not only been preaching to folks that the Kingdom of God is at hand; he has been *demonstrating* and *enacting* what that Kingdom looks like. And part of what it looks like is the healing and liberation of persons from anything that keeps them from being fully human.

As a result, Jesus' preaching, teaching, and healing have engendered such a response from the people that he has become a "rock star" of sorts. Just prior to this the crowds have become so vast that he 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.

So, in a short period of time, Jesus has amassed this massive following of people, a groundswell of popularity because of what he is *saying* and what he is *doing*. He has appeared on the scene, and he has set himself over against anything

and everything that would rob persons of the abundant life God intends them to have.

In some cases it is unclean spirits. In other cases it is disease that ravages body, mind, or spirit. Jesus stands against whatever makes people suffer and prevents them from living in community. By what he *says* and by what he *does*, he brings a whole new way of relating to God. And one of the things that makes Jesus' way so peculiar is that it is a way of relating to God that goes beyond *religion*.

The word "religion" is based on the Latin terms from which we get our English words "ligament," and "obligation." Religion, then, often serves to connect us to God by specifying what actions, duties, and obligations we should undertake out of reverence to God.

This is not always a bad thing. Religion can offer us ways to structure our thinking about God and provide us forms by which to express our gratitude to God for God's gracious activity in our lives.

Where we get into trouble is when we allow religion to become a substitute for genuine, living *relationship* with God. Religion moves from being a way to facilitate our relationship with God to becoming a way of *controlling* or manipulating God (and others).

This happened to the Scribes and religious leaders of Jesus' day. And it can easily happen to us. And so Jesus appears on the scene and reveals a God who is so much bigger and greater than our religious systems and boxes. A God who doesn't fit our "structures." A God who doesn't always conform to our rules. A gracious God full of mercy and love, who is always doing a new thing.

Now -- what kind of response to you think that kind of speaking and acting is going to generate?

Our text here tells us what happens in Jesus' case. The crowds have become so large and the response so great, that Jesus' own family comes out to "take charge of him." They say: "he is out of his mind."

Jesus' own family says, "Jesus has gone crazy. He is out of his mind. His success has gone viral, and it's gone to his head."

And the religious authorities weigh in by saying: "he is possessed by Beelzebub. The prince of demons is driving out demons."

So, Jesus' family thinks that he has read his own press and he's gotten too big for his britches. And the religious elite take it further. Jesus does not merely have an ego problem -- he's gone stark raving mad!

It might be easy to be critical of the religious authorities here, but we must understand that if we do so we also indict ourselves.

Jesus shows up here, and the Kingdom of God that he brings by what he says and what he does is so foreign and so different from what people expect that they have no idea what to make of him. He doesn't fit their categories. And when someone doesn't fit our categories, what do we typically do? We quickly label that person as deviant, abnormal, crazy -- maybe even possessed. We assume that what we know and believe to be true is normal, natural, and God-ordained. And that then becomes the standard by which we measure -- and judge -- the thoughts and actions of others.

I believe that is what is happening to Jesus here. The love of God that Jesus brings to people is so radical, so profound, so out-of-the-ordinary that folks don't know what to do with it. The love of God that appears in Jesus is so intent on invading and healing the brokenness in their lives that it confounds conventional wisdom. It transcends reason. So the prevailing response to such love is *to demonize it*, and the One who embodies it.

Jesus' response to this is telling. He asks: "How can Satan drive out Satan?" And then in a simple statement he reveals the purpose of his coming: *No one can enter a strong man's house and carry off his possessions unless he first binds the strong man."*

This is precisely what Jesus has been doing in Mark's Gospel. He has been binding the strong man, he has been confronting the darkness and brokenness that

keeps people from being fully human. He brings a different way of relating to God and to one another, a way marked by love, compassion, sacrifice, generosity, and mercy. A way of relating to God that goes way beyond the confines of religion.

And because of this, some of the folks begin to wonder if Jesus' family is right. They wonder if Jesus might be just a little bit "off center." A bit delusional, perhaps. To bring this into our own day, we might employ euphemisms like "eccentric" or "quirky" or even "flaky."

The New Testament refers to believers and followers of Jesus as "a peculiar people." And such we are. And I sometimes wonder if you and I don't have to be *just a little bit crazy* to believe all of this.

Perhaps we do. For what Christ says and does 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 takes you beyond religion, and into relationship. You may need to be just a little bit crazy to accept it. And perhaps even crazier *not* to.

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