

Epworth Chapel on the Green
June 7, 2015
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 Reign of God is at hand; he has been *demonstrating* and *enacting* what that 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 mental and physical disease. 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 seem so peculiar is the relationship of what he is doing to established *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.

But sometimes, religious folks create rules and establish protocol, not so much for how they might *help* others, but for how they help us to define ourselves and provide a standard against which we can *judge* others. We establish social and religious "norms." And when someone does not conform to those norms, we have labels that we can use: rebel, radical, misfit – and a host of other terms.

This is precisely what happens to Jesus in our text. The crowds, the religious authorities, and even Jesus' own family are judging him against predetermined social and

religious “norms.” What Jesus has been doing does not exactly conform to those “norms,” and so he begins to catch some flack.

His family thinks he is crazy. Mentally disturbed. The religious authorities think he is demon possessed, that he is actually an emissary of Satan. The prince of demons is driving out demons.

It is so easy for us to be critical of the religious authorities here, so easy for us to wag our finger at them and say: “You just don’t get it, do you?”

But I wonder: Are they the only ones who don’t get it?

Jesus arrives on the scene, and 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. He is not within the boundaries of what is socially and religiously accepted.

And when someone like that comes near, what do we typically do? We do what those in our text 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. And 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 way of relating to God and to one another marked by love, compassion, sacrifice, generosity, and mercy. A way of relating to God that takes these folks – who were descendents of Abraham -- back to the *true spirit and intent* of their religion.

In that sense, Jesus was a radical. The word “radical” comes from the Latin word “root.” The word “radical” simply means “to the roots.” So a radical is simply a person who calls others back to the roots, back to the foundation of things. But some in the crowd here begin to wonder if Jesus might be just a little bit "off center." A bit delusional, perhaps.

This story set me to thinking this week. I asked myself this question:

Where in our modern society do we see something similar occurring? Who in the church is calling the church and society back to the roots, back to the foundation of

things? Who in the church is ministering in such a way so as to be the brunt of criticism and even hatred?

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.