

Sermon – Second Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 3: 20-35

The classic binary of good and evil is at the heart of our scripture readings today. We hear the story of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden, and the deception they experienced in their desire for the knowledge of the world. The evil one is cast as the serpent who is forever-after cursed and destined to eat the dust of the ground as it slithers around.

Then we hear Paul from his second letter to the Corinthians comparing the corruption and decay inevitable in the temporal world to the eternal life with God in the heavens. Finally we hear from Mark about Jesus encounter with the crowds and his family, and the Scribes who see him as consumed with ‘Beelzebul,’ the ruler of the demons. Even his family are concerned that he has gone mad, usually a synonym for evil.

So much of life is set up based on this binary of good and evil. We all want to be good and to avoid being labelled as ‘evil.’ Some people want to be known for evil, but if you could get them to open up about this self-identification, it’s usually a mask for pain and anger. Society, since the days of Adam and Eve has been built on the foundation that good triumphs over evil, however, evil seems so often to overpower good.

The scene Jesus finds himself in is a chaotic one. He needs to eat and relax but the crowd follows him everywhere and inhibits his ability to even sit down to a meal. You can imagine the energy of the crowd justling to get close to him so that they might be healed. On the periphery we find the pious Scribes and the family of Jesus, who arrive concerned that he has gone mad. The Scribes feel his behavior resembles someone possessed by the devil.

What happens next is classic Jesus. He sees the chaos as a teaching moment and tells two parables. The first is about the danger of division, the evil if you like of division. Division is death to family, institutions, governments and others. The second parable is about the manipulation of situations to achieve a desired outcome, in this case the tying up of a strong man so that the robbers might steal from his house.

Then Jesus teaches something very important. Sins and blasphemies, he says will be forgiven, however if someone deliberately blasphemes against the Holy Spirit, their sins will not be forgiven. This might cause some uncomfortable squirming. How is it that we understand God, through Jesus to be all loving and forgiving of our sins, even sins against God, yet here Jesus is specifically carving out from that loving and forgiving nature those that sin against the Holy Spirit. Just sit with that for a moment.

The end of the gospel passage today reveals Jesus as seeming to reject his blood family. His mother and brothers are concerned for him and turn up to protect him and rescue him from the crowd, afraid that he has become mad. When they call out to him, and get the disciples to deliberately tell him they are there for him, he dismisses them with a rather curt statement –

“Who are my mother and my brothers.” In his statement however he is casting the net of familial bonds to all those that turn from evil to follow his teaching, and this would hopefully include his blood relatives, but also those that repent of their ways and turn to follow him into a new life and a new community.

As we do often with Jesus teaching we conjure up in our minds an image of what camp we call into. In this encounter is it the camp of the ‘good’ or with the so-called ‘evil’ others. Are we standing with Jesus’ mother and brothers, and with the Scribes, or are we with the crowd of misfit toys, all scrambling to touch Jesus and to be healed.

In the institutional church we often piously think we are the ‘good’ people of the world. When we give of ourselves to help and support others we feel good about ourselves. However, in some instances, the church becomes a pious political player who co-opt Jesus to bolster their authority in the world. But often the co-option of Jesus is for self-gain and many fail to recognize how Jesus, now through the Holy Spirit, is working in our communities.

Jesus was not like the religious leaders of his day. Jesus, although a practicing Jewish man, was not afraid of the religious purity laws that were enacted to preserve their faith. He wasn’t afraid to be touched by the unwashed, the gentiles, the poor, the lepers and the sick, the possessed and the lost, the orphans, widows and tax collectors. He was not afraid to be alone with women. All were invited to come close to him and to break bread with him and to touch him.

Jesus’ family and the Scribes fail to recognize the extended hand Jesus offers to those that society deliberately excluded. They both thought he had lost his mind.

In the chaos of the moment, Jesus is principally concerned about others. Therefore the chaos is not evil, as chaos often is depicted, but the chaos is good, good in the sense that Jesus uses it as a teaching moment to illustrate that the people who are so often marginalized by society, who fight to be seen and acknowledged, who systematically get devalued and disempowered by society, are good people, people who deserve to be included, to be healed and accepted.

If Jesus came amongst us today there would be no shortage of people disenfranchised by society who he would reach out to touch Jesus and to be healed. Refugees, the homeless, the incarcerated, those with mental health challenges, LBGTQ+ folks, especially those who are transgender and the aged and the lonely. Far too many people in our community are excluded by powerful forces in society, and especially by pious religious institutions that seem hellbent on excluding one group after another, out of concern that these people are ‘evil’ and corrosive to society.

People who get excluded because of prejudice and privilege generally only want to be included. I well remember being told that I was not to become a warden of my church because the Archbishop did not want gay people in church leadership. Thankfully for me the parish I attended refused to bow to the Archbishop’s bigotry.

This month we celebrate LGBTQ+ Pride month, a month to celebrate a community that has been disenfranchised for far too long. You might all remember the debate around gay marriage. Gay marriage was portrayed by pious religious leaders as being corrosive to heterosexual marriage. It was to lead to the breakdown of families as we knew it then.

What happened? Nothing! Gay marriage provided recognition for couples of same sex who wanted to commit their lives to each other and have their commitment blessed by the church just the same as heterosexual people. Heterosexual marriage was already crumbling all on its very own with skyrocketing rates of divorce. These religious leaders did not address the failing state of marriage generally. Evil manifested itself in the stoking of fear.

I saw the right to marriage equality, as I saw the right to ordination of openly LGBTQ clergy, as the Holy Spirit at work in our contemporary world. Jesus was the incarnate God, who carried within his soul the spirit of God. Jesus reached out to the lost and outcast, specifically to bring them into the community, to give them back their dignity and to teach them about the right way to live.

We have just celebrated the Feast of Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit into the world after Jesus' ascension. The spirit is often depicted as a dove, white and pure, floating effortlessly over the heads of people. However, the Pentecost spirit is depicted as fire, which is often unpredictable, fanned by the wind, wild and full of energy. Like raging fire, the Holy Spirit comes into the world in ways that we just don't fully understand yet we are asked to discern just that, the Holy Spirit at work.

The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians in his second letter to them "we also believe, and so we speak, because we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus, and will bring us with you into his presence. Yes, everything is for your sake, so that grace, as it extends to more and more people, may increase thanksgiving, to the glory of God."

God's grace lies not in rejection, not in pious acts of judgement and exclusion, but in the humility of Jesus who reached out to the lost, to those that know they need healing and to those that had a desire to depower themselves for the sake of building others up.

If we can find compassion for our own wounds and the wounds of others, we might find ourselves deep in the pressing crowd, eager to touch Jesus, eager to be healed, helping others to move forward for their own healing.

If we can't find that humility and compassion then maybe we are standing on the edges with the scribes and with Jesus family, who have a misguided understanding of Jesus and the work he was doing.

Amen