

Mark 3:20-35

²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons, he casts out demons.” ²³ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷ But no one can enter a strong man’s house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man; then, indeed the house can be plundered.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— ³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³ And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

We are just in chapter three of the Gospel, and yet Jesus has sprinted through Galilee, being baptized, calling some anglers and others to follow him, proclaimed good news with a fantastic degree of authority people hadn’t heard before, healed people, cast out demons, and made mortal enemies of the Pharisees and Herodians. The breakneck pace continues.

Let’s attend to today’s story.

The gospel begins as Jesus is like a magnet, drawing a huge crowd. It is so big that this adoring crowd is crushing him so much that they can’t even eat. His family doesn’t know what to do about this situation. I think they are worried about him. He has always been different. And now, has he gone too far? They are trying to restrain him and maybe take him home where he will be safe. They are afraid he has lost his mind. I don’t think they have bought into the idea that Satan possesses him. There is the famous line in the poem “The Hired Hand” by Robert Frost: ‘Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.’ His family wants to take him home because he needs them, and they want him to be safe away from the crowd and the religious authorities. They don’t know what to make of Jesus, but his opponents do.

He is under attack by the powerful religious authorities, accused of being possessed by the Spirit of Satan. Where else could he get such power and authority? They claim that Beelzebul is the source of

his power and authority, for he has been teaching, casting out demons, and healing on the Sabbath, and his opponents say he is an agent of Satan. There is no other way he could be so powerful. His response shuts down their argument. He retorts, “If I was an agent of Satan, why then am I casting out demons? It doesn’t make sense. Satan is not going to seek to destroy himself. Divided Kingdoms cannot stand.” And here he speaks an eternal truth that we so need to hear. “A house divided against itself cannot stand.” This truth was echoed by Abraham Lincoln in 1858 and I am afraid the same is true today. We need to hear again these powerful words, for we live in a time of division and anger that is poisoning our society. Everywhere, there is so much of the “us versus them” mentality in a situation that people of faith cannot abide. A house divided against itself cannot stand.

Jesus says, “What you say makes no sense. If I am an agent of Satan, why would I be tearing down his kingdom by bringing healing and restoration to so many, as well as freeing people from the demons that possess them? Instead, I am plundering Satan’s house in the name of the Kingdom of God. I am Satan’s enemy, not his agent.

“Can’t you see that God’s Spirit in me enables me to do this work?” He declares that he can do these things by the Holy Spirit dwelling in him. They cannot see this. And this is tied to the eternal or unforgivable sin, as many of us learned it. “Attack me if you will, but not the work of the Holy Spirit.” When the spirit of God is clearly at work in your presence, and you deny it, it is to sin against the spirit—refusing to acknowledge the Spirit at work when it is right before you is blasphemy against the Spirit and is the eternal or unforgivable sin in our story.

However, I am sure there is no such thing as a sin greater than God’s power to forgive. There is no sin that is unforgivable, but we know that Jesus often exaggerates to make a point. Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection sent a message throughout time that we can be forgiven because God has an unconquerable love for us. Even the worst we can do can be forgiven. But when we don’t see the spirit as present and active in our lives, we close ourselves off to the experience of Forgiveness. It is not that it is impossible, for nothing is impossible with God. But if we deny the presence of the spirit, when the spirit is clearly at work, we close ourselves off to the experience of forgiveness. His point is that they have done something terrible. They have failed to see God’s spirit present and active in Jesus; they don’t see it in the people he has healed, taught, and rescued from demonic possession. It is not unforgivable, but we commit a great sin when we fail to see the Holy Spirit in every person. I will admit sometimes we have to look pretty hard.

The authorities aren’t the only ones who fail to see God’s spirit at work in Jesus and those he has healed. His family cannot see it either. And this is hard to understand, for they knew him well. From his parents, he was nurtured so that he saw everyone in the image of God and, with a spark, the spirit of the divine in them.

Imagine how hard it is for him. The religious authorities don't get him—that's one thing—but that his family doesn't see the spirit at work in his ministry—that's quite another and very painful. No wonder his words about them seem so hard when he says that they are not his blood relatives but his followers are his true family. You would think his mother and brothers of all people, should know that the spirit has been active throughout his life. But they can't at this point. However, this spiritual inability to see the presence of the spirit to see the real Jesus for who he is, is not permanent; his mother will be around when he is crucified and raised, and his brother James will come to lead the early church.

Fortunately, Jesus has some folks with him who sense the spirit at work in him, and he broadens his concept of his family. He redefines his family as broader than blood. We all know that it is possible we have people that are as dear to us as family. Judi, who many of you have met, is Aunt Judi in our family. Children and grandchildren have Godparents.

For Jesus now, those who do God's will and who see the Holy Spirit present in Jesus are his family. These folks are his family, as he says, his mother, brothers, and sisters.

The Holy Spirit is in everyone, including you and me. God is present and active in you and me, and if we can't sense that, we may be committing the gravest sin of all. How can we live as if others are in the image of God and treat them as such if we can't even see ourselves that way?

One of my favorite themes is how important it is to see things. It is not enough to see Jesus as being endowed with the Spirit. We must see all humanity endowed with the divine spark. This is at the heart of our faith, the belief that the living God is present and active in all of us.

It is vital when society is plagued by an epidemic of loneliness and isolation. This was exacerbated by COVID but even before that, people were feeling isolated. And this isolation that many experience can be just as deadly as smoking. People need to be seen and valued, and we can do something about that. An advisory report from the Surgeon General last May revealed, including a 29% increased risk of heart disease, a 32% increased risk of stroke, and a 50% increased risk of developing dementia for older adults. Advisories are reserved for issues deemed significant public health challenges that "need the American people's immediate attention."

But the greatest damage from the decline in social interaction is with our young people. Many are losing the quality of connections that are so important. We need to work on creating a culture of connection. That is one of the church's strong suits because, using Paul's imagery, we are a body connected from one part to another through Christ. In the best sense of the word, we are a family seeking to maintain our connection not only with God but with each other. So, keep reaching out to each other and to your friends and neighbors.

<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/02/1173418268/loneliness-connection-mental-health-dementia-surgeon-general>

We are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness and a pandemic of division, and we can do something about that as well.

So, the next time you feel about to get drawn into an us-versus-them situation, take a deep breath and look for the presence of God in the other. Even if you can't see it, know it is there. Imagine how much more pleasant the months leading to November would be if this idea caught hold. But we can't do anything about how other people act; we are responsible for our own behavior, which is vital for our well-being and those around us. So, we must treat each other as people in the image of God. When we do that, we make a difference in the world around us.

Three principles stood out in a course I took called Cultivating Unity a year ago during Lent. Assume and affirm the Good in others. Seek to understand. And engage each other with compassion. To this, I would add a fourth: tame your social media posts, remove the snark and the hostility from your interactions, and refuse to engage with those who use hostility or sarcasm to put down others. None of this is as dramatic as marching, singing, and protesting; there is a time for that. But even there, the battle needs to be over ideas and issues rather than hostile attacks on the other.

Even though it is less glamorous, I want to share a quote from the musical Kinky Boots that I keep on my desk: "You change the world when you change your mind."

You can make a difference in the lives of people around you; Jesus did, and so can we.