

## A House Divided

### Mark 3: 20-35

It was a typical systemic counter attack! Anyone with the slightest background in the theory of family systems could have seen it coming. This sort of thing has certainly happened to all of us. You find yourself making some changes and those closest, your family, seem to be the most critical. Your changes mean they have to make changes, too.

That's what happened to Jesus, evidently. Jesus finds his calling. If he really was thirty, that's getting pretty old, in that culture, to leave home and change careers. Well, at least he was moving ahead. Though the career path of itinerant teacher was not exactly a stable or lucrative one, at least being a prophet would not necessarily be a source of shame to Jesus' family. Of course, that would depend on what he actually did and said as a prophet and as a teacher.

According to Mark's gospel, once Jesus got clear about his sense of call – once he decided how and what to teach – he launched into a ministry campaign in the region around his home town. He started off with great enthusiasm. “Good news, everybody! Everything's different than you thought. God's kingdom is arriving now and not at the end of time.”

Jesus challenged the religious leaders by healing people, even on the Sabbath. He was making quite a name for himself. After choosing twelve disciples and sending them out to continue his message, “Jesus went home”. Presumably, he went to Nazareth and that's where the excitement really began.

They pulled what was really a double attack on Jesus: first his family, then the religious leaders, then his family again. This is kind of a *sandwich story* as Mark's gospel tells it. *The first part happens when Jesus came home. He was trying to eat a meal, maybe with family. A huge crowd shows up and creates so much commotion that they couldn't eat their meal.*

*Jesus apparently went out to meet the crowd. There were some who were complaining about his teaching. They said things like, he's “lost his mind”. Jesus' family comes out and begins telling everybody that Jesus is deluded. Mark writes, “his family ... went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’”*

*To be honest, this is a scene not unlike some families today. Arguments develop around the dinner table, especially when friends show up unexpectedly. Perhaps you have heard a loved one ask, with an accusing tone, “have you lost your mind?”*

All of a sudden, the religious officials show up and start talking. This is the second part of the sandwich story. He's *“demonic” and under the influence of “Beelzebul”*. The party in power tried to demonize Jesus. How is that same tactic used today?

There is a famous phrase in this story: “a house divided against itself cannot stand”. Why is it familiar? This sentence was quoted by Lincoln in his second inaugural address. It is important that we not limit our interpretation to Lincoln's reference to a divided nation at the end of the Civil War.

Jesus was talking about the house of Judaism divided by the forces of evil who were represented by the scribes and priests. They served evil rather than God. As such, they were incapable of making Judaism strong again. He used some additional images such as the kingdom of God coming like a “thief in the night”. He said that only God was capable of “binding the strong man”. The binding image had overtones of exorcism.

Jesus was telling the scribes that they were the ones who were opposing God -- not Jesus! There was a crying need to exorcise a demonic presence from Judaism and they were that presence. To exorcise them was Jesus' purpose.

Having thus endeared himself to the scribes, Mark shifts Jesus' attention back to his family. Somehow, Jesus had gone back inside the house. He was teaching and also arguing with the scribes. From outside, his family sent word inside to get Jesus' attention. At this point, Jesus redefines the meaning of family. One's family was the primary social unit of Jesus' day. It gave identity and meaning in life. You were ultimately loyal to your family.

Jesus turned this assumption on its head. His family members are outside the house. He is inside with both his followers and his foes. His family is concerned with their reputation

while Jesus is concerned about what God is doing in his life. Those around him, his followers who believe in him, are now his family. They are the new wineskins for the new wine he offers.

This is a story about Jesus burning bridges and creating division throughout the early part of his ministry. Jesus has become a prophet. The prophetic role is to open things up, reveal, and often divide by speaking a hard truth. The result is often anger and hostility toward the prophet whose message seems to divide people.

The Church has a *prophetic* role in society. We have a responsibility to speak the truth from the perspective of our faith. We are called to challenge our society to respond in terms of justice, peace, and inclusion. We are called to challenge the self-serving prophets of what Walter Breuggemann calls the Royal Consciousness – those who serve the status-quo, entrenched interests, oppressive injustice, and exploitation wherever it's seen. That includes all political parties, religious organizations, and commercial interests -- even ourselves. This is the church's prophetic role.

The Church also has a *priestly* role: being a unifying rather than a dividing force in society and in the world. In this role, we are to call people to the common tasks of humanity: to work together on behalf of all people. So, what is the difference between unity and uniformity? How do you find unity without compromising integrity? How do you see Crossroads Church working for the goal of unity among Christians? How can Christians work for unity among the people of the world?

What does unity mean for us in the sense Jesus taught? It does not mean shared beliefs: that is, theological beliefs held in common. Realizing this frees us from a compulsive need to have others agree with us and accept or reject us accord to our beliefs. Such uniformity becomes their problem, not ours.

Unity means that people have a common identity as tangible and physical expressions of God, the Ground of All Being. Embracing unity means confessing that each person expresses who God is. Our conflicting beliefs and colliding passions may themselves actually reflect God. How we choose to act as a result of these conflicts may or may not reflect God.

How does unity happen? How does it happen through us? Unity is the by-product of our participation in the common purpose of expressing God in our living. This is true even when that commonality is not recognized due to our different faith traditions.

Christians follow Jesus' Way. Many believe it is the only way. What is that way? Jesus expressed God's nature and God's purpose in such a clear way that we point to his (human) life as the ultimate revelation of God's nature. In that sense, from our limited human perspective, we identify the life Jesus lived as divine.

What did Jesus do? He taught about the power of love to transform evil into good. He demonstrated the power of that love by giving his life. What is this evil? From where did it come?

Evil results from our choices. Systemic evil is the result of many choices over many generations. Seen this way, evil is part of God's creation. It comes as the consequence of choices freely made. World hunger is one example. There actually is plenty of food in the world to feed everyone. The hunger we see results from war, a choice we human beings make.

It seems unlike God, again to my limited understanding, to condemn us and to punish Jesus in our place for the way we exercise our God-given free will. The very essence of that free will is to explore options and ask challenging questions. As we live, we discover the natural consequences of our choices and ultimately decide and choose in light of those consequences.

Jesus taught people how to choose to live in harmony with the mind and nature of God. He challenged people to recognize the hatred, violence, greed, and fear that lead to oppression, injustice, resentment, and destruction.

Jesus' way is choosing the consequences that ultimately are life-giving, positive, loving, and transformational rather than destructive. So, what are you and I called to do? What are we, both new and recommitted members of Crossroads called to do? Our calling is not to destroy evil in the world, even in ourselves. We cannot and need not.

God's new creation, the kingdom, comes not as result of defeating or destroying evil, but

whenever evil is transformed into good. We are called to transform evil by placing ourselves at risk by choosing to love and act for the spiritual growth of humanity, not for the selfish interest of any particular group -- even our group!

Jesus walked into the valley of death for love of the Romans, the Pharisees, the priests, and the scribes as well as for the poor and dispossessed. On behalf of a violent and hurting world, Jesus chose to show that God's love has no limit to its embracing and redeeming power. He showed that love by laying down his life.

You and I are called. This church is called no less to lay down our lives in service to the cause of unity each day. Laying down our lives means living life fully each day for the higher cause of expressing God's nature and purpose.

Unity does not come through hating or condemning others, even if they don't agree with our theology, politics, or commitments to justice and peace; even if they are religious fundamentalists or Fred Phelps' Christians. We help bring unity by loving them and by showing them and the rest of humanity, the Way of God we see in Jesus.