

# First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 3.19b-30

“Getting Coffee with Jerry Seinfeld”

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Then he went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’ And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, ‘He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.’ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, ‘How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. 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.

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

I am lucky. I have kids who are smart and make me watch really fun stuff on the television. Left to my own devices I would watch documentaries about African genocide or instructional videos for stone wall building. A good day for me is spent with a Russian novel meant to explore Dante. I am lot of fun at parties.

Our son Ethan said to me, “I think you would like to watch a show called, ‘Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee.’” My first impulse was to say, “doesn’t sound very instructive.” I have learned to trust the taste of others.

“Comedians in Cars Getting Coffee” is a great show. Jerry Seinfeld picks up really funny people and they get coffee. There is no plot, no instructional component, and absolutely no script. It is intriguing to watch people who continuously poke fun at reality be in their own reality television.

One episode was with a very funny Canadian, Norm MacDonald. After much viewing pleasure and laughter, Ethan said, “have you ever seen his bit on world war?” There was enough of a pause for both of us to realize it was a rhetorical question.

In short order David Letterman was introducing “a very funny man, Norm MacDonald.” MacDonald started off by saying, “there is a lot of talk in the news today about threats from rogue countries. Afghanistan, Iran, North Korea. They are dangerous and everyone should be concerned. But I have to say, I don’t think they are the problem. No. The country that really worries me is Germany. Germany.

“Now, you may not be history buffs, so you might not remember that about hundred years ago Germany decided to go to war. But they didn’t attack another country, or a continent. No. Germany went to war . . . with the world. And you would think that this would be a short-lived affair. The world would quickly defeat Germany. But it lasted quite a long time and it was close. The world almost lost.

Thirty years later and some really bad actors, Germany decided to go to war again . . . with the world. And again. It was close. The world almost lost again. So I am thinking it has been awhile and we need to think this through. The nations of the world need to get together and tell Germany they can’t be a country any longer because of how many times they went to war . . . with the world.

As I laughed I thought, *oh man, this isn’t funny. This is true. Germany went to war with the world twice and each time it was close.* I know there are serious threats and violent nations out there right now. And we should take them seriously, but Germany, no one really competes with Germany for taking on . . . the world. Norm MacDonald is right; we need to keep an eye on them.

Threats are funny. Well, they are not really funny-ha-ha; they are funny strange. They are strange in that we really don’t see the things that are really dangerous. You would think that the things that frighten us most would be the most threatening or that the most threatening would be the most frightening. But it is often the opposite. What is the most threatening is often a source of confidence or assurance; we say things like, “Oh that’s no big deal,” when it is.

Seeing a threat, being threatened, this is the challenge of our passage today. People felt threatened by Jesus. It’s hard for us to see Jesus as threatening. We know he is the loving messiah, the good shepherd, the one who blesses the children. Jesus is my best friend was a very common claim of evangelicals not too long ago. Yet, in Capernaum, after significant breaches of the Sabbath, a wild crowd following him everywhere, and the miracles, not to mention the demons know him and obey him, it was clear that Jesus of Nazareth was different. And different is something we often find threatening.

People were concerned. His family shows up because they think he has lost his mind; scribes are sent to Galilee from Jerusalem to find out what is going on. Scribes from Jerusalem, think state inspectors or auditors. Their assessment was simple: Jesus is of the devil. This is not good.

Next week we will hear the response Jesus gave to his family and to their concerns. This week we have the response Jesus gave to the scribes, their claim that he was evil. Before we listen to what Jesus said to the scribes, it is important to remember how threatening he was to them and how unthreatening he is to us.

Go back to Germany. When I think of Germany I think of nice cars that drive fast on the autobahn; I think of beer and wonderful brats; I think of terribly long words and fantastic music: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. And I think of philosophy, theology, poetry. I tend to forget those years of . . . world war.

It could be that our teaching today simply records: Jesus freaked people out. People in charge didn't like Jesus. Certainly an easy take away. If huge crowds follow you and harass you and you don't eat, your mother will be concerned. Sure. Valid pictures of our reading. What if, though, our passage is not simply a record of the events, but a challenge we face all the time? We may not speak in the way Jesus did or find ourselves debating with scribes from Jerusalem, but what if the challenge of the passage is not bizarre, but common?

Jesus' strange talk about Beelzebul and binding a strong man fall into the category of weird things Jesus said. A house divided against itself cannot stand. We know this, but Satan against Satan, a kingdom? And then the ominous "unforgivable sin." In this crazy talk, what we might miss is the obvious. Remember what is often the most threatening is what we fail to see. We may fail to see the obvious here.

The first obvious claim is this: evil doesn't defeat evil; darkness does not overcome darkness. It just doesn't work that way. But we try. We try to defeat anger with anger; we try to out hate people; we treat the wrongdoer with vengeance and wrath and punishment all the while believing this will make things better. We call our prisons a "correctional system." It just doesn't work that way.

The threat is that we believe it will. There is a persistent theme in the psalms: violence begets violence; the scheme, the trap of the evil doer ensnares the evildoer. We know this. Yet, we believe we can use violence and evil for just purposes; somehow we believe our good intention, our good character excludes us from the inevitable outcome of destruction. If I am good person, my anger is justified. And my justified anger will make things right. No.

Again, the threat is that we believe we can use Satan against Satan, Beelzebul against Beelzebul. We don't say things like that, but when we justify hatred or fear or anger or derision so to use it for good, we fall into madness.

The second obvious claim is this: you bind a strong man before you plunder his house. Logical. True. Jesus gives very good advice here for robbery and plunder if you ever find yourself in such circumstances. We may not literally plunder houses, but we are in need of binding the strong man.

How the strong man is bound, this is the key. The strong man is bound by someone, something stronger. In the legend of Samson we have a clue: you must know the source of strength. The clue is to ask: what is our source of strength?

What makes you feel secure? What gives you confidence? What is your assurance? Where do you find energy, stamina, strength? So often, what fuels us is worry. When you are frustrated or concerned or fearful, we can find strength in being belligerent or impatient or demanding. When the day is bad we can lash out, fall apart, take out our frustrations on other people.

This is what makes the reading today relevant in our lives. We all need to face the obstacles of life and get through them. The question is, how? Jesus says, you must bind the strong man. Although a bit cryptic in the moment, in the larger life of Jesus, we can see what he means. John the Baptist said, someone stronger, greater than I am is coming after me. Jesus is the stronger one. He is the one who binds the strong man.

He does when he chooses compassion over control, mercy over vengeance, patience over anger. Think of the strong man as the strong impulse we all have to strike back, to match insult with insult, to justify violence for violence. Jesus will tell his disciples, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile, lend to the unworthy, and sacrifice even for the fool. In other words, not only resist the temptation to offer evil for evil, offer good. Do what is right in the face of wrong.

The last part of our reading today is very difficult because it is ominous. The unforgivable sin. Martin Luther was plagued with guilt and fear over this passage because of his role in the Reformation. What if his calls to lead people to reject the pope and the priest and the monastic and the tradition and the order of authority, what if this was . . . misguided? Pretty big impact. What if he was mistaken? He asked himself these things. Martin Luther told the people, these traditions are wrong, unclean as it were. What if in saying this, he was, in essence, claiming Jesus is unclean?

Always be happy you are not Martin Luther. He had a tough row to hoe. The unforgivable sin, the grieving of the Holy Spirit, declaring Jesus unclean, is prefaced by a very wide swath of sins that are forgiven. Everything else is forgivable, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit is not. So, you know, just avoid that one. But what if it is not avoidable? What if it is the unseen threat, the real challenge that we do not see?

At the session meeting this week we talked about strategic planning. This is a good thing. Every church, business, organization needs to do it. Part of strategic planning is a s.w.o.t. analysis: you ask what are our strengths; our weaknesses; our opportunities; and our threats? The first two are easy to find out. We have great music, great mission projects; we have low attendance at educational events and not enough small groups. Opportunities are a bit more difficult to see. If you have done something in the same place in the same way for 215 years, new directions are not always obvious. But we are exploring social media, we put in a labyrinth, we are sending a group of young people to learn about ancient forms of worship. So there are some opportunities.

Yet, when we get to the threat part of the s.w.o.t. analysis, we will most likely stumble. We will stumble because we will go to symptoms (attendance, money, an old building with an old furnace). We go to symptoms and most likely come short of the maladies. For the threat to the church is not how many people there are or how much money we have or if the roof leaks. Those are problems for sure, but they are not the real threat.

The real threat is if we miss the gospel of Jesus. The real threat is if we believe in Jesus but we do not live like Jesus. When we answer anger with anger, when we believe good things come from hatred, this is far from the gospel. When we justify indifference and use shame to demean, then we have abandoned the kingdom of God.

That we are angry, forgivable; that we trust anger more than patience is a rejection of the gospel. That we want vengeance, seek it out, forgivable; that we trust wrath more than mercy is a failure to accept the life of Jesus. We can keep going. We can because this threat is embedded in our everyday life. That we so often fail to see the threat is a great challenge.

So, here is the bottom line: watch out for Germany. I am sure no one in 1913 said, I am sure Germany will go to war with the world and it will be close, but they did and it was. So heads up.

And if you are going to lead a movement that gathers thousands, millions of people make sure you get something to eat so your mother doesn't worry.

And if you are going to plunder, be sure the strong man is tied up. Hard to both steal and fight at the same time.

And if you are faced with the temptation of anger, choose patience; if you are faced with hatred, choose compassion; if you are faced the desire to judge, to injure, choose mercy. Make humility and compassion and forgiveness your confidence, your sources of strength. For they are the strength overcoming the darkness in us. Amen.