

First Presbyterian Church of Watertown

Mark 3. 20; 31-15

“Who is My Mother?”

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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.’

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

John was one of the first people I met at the psychiatric hospital. I was assigned to him. The assignment was twofold. I believe the head chaplain needed a break from John—they had met together for many, many years. A break would do them both good. I also believe the head chaplain wanted to see how I would fare with someone much smarter than me. John was brilliant; he came from a brilliant family who lived in a brilliant place.

I worked with John for two years, the whole time I was there. We spoke once a week for an hour. We never became friends. I was his student, not his peer. Each week John chose or assigned a play of Shakespeare that I was to read before we met again. I read a lot of Shakespeare.

At first I thought John would want to discuss the play like people discuss a book at a book club. I have never been in a book club so I am guessing, but I have been in a lecture where the professor discusses an assigned reading. Meeting with John was much like the later. He spoke; I listened; he asked questions; I answered; he scoffed at my answers for the most part.

I did catch a break early on. During one of his rambling critiques he mentioned the misdeeds of one of the actors in one of the plays as “breadcrumb sins.” This is a rather obscure line from a Bob Dylan song so I asked, “are you a Dylan fan?” He didn’t answer, but he did smirk.

Our weekly meetings had two phases. The first was the lecture. This lasted between 15-20 minutes about the length of a sermon. Here John offered very unique and engaging theories as to what Shakespeare was trying to say in our play of the week. Here I was to listen intently and be quiet. Early on I tried to interject, to offer my version, but I learned that this was neither enjoyed nor of much value. So I learned to listen.

The second phase of our meeting, which lasted about forty minutes, was a long rambling account of how John saw the world, believed the world to be. The ramble was the same every week; sometimes more impassioned, sometimes less. That this ramble involved aliens and an invisible but real hierarchy of intelligence that was a consequence of the aliens was one of the factors leading to John's residing at a psychiatric hospital. This phase was not as engaging as Shakespeare.

The intent of the head chaplain was successful. I handed John back after two years no better or worse. That I lasted two years was the element of success. My time allowed the head chaplain to re-engage again with John after a much needed break. And, spending time with John each week for two years taught me a great lesson. With John I came to see the precarious beauty of intelligence; the fragile quality of sanity. Mostly, though, I found the limited value of knowing. It is not what you know; it is what you can do.

I am not sure if mental illness is the key to the passage we read from Mark today, but it is the unique factor. When Matthew and Luke would tell the story of Jesus dismissing his family, they would omit the rumor leading his family to intervene. Matthew and Luke left that out mental illness when they accounted for the dismissal of Jesus' family. Some scholars suggest that they could not include the worry of mental illness on the part of his family because Matthew and Luke had gone out of their way to describe the family of Jesus in very poetic, loving images in the stories of the annunciation and nativity. Having done so, they could not paint them in such a negative light.

The other change Matthew and Luke brought to Mark's account is that they separated the dismissal of the family from the diagnosis of the scribes of Jerusalem. Matthew and Luke would both follow Mark's recounting of the diagnosis of the Jerusalem scribes, "he is unclean. He casts out Satan with Satan." They too include this story in their account of Jesus, but unlike Mark, Matthew and Luke separate the diagnosis from the dismissal. The two stories Mark intertwines would be separated later on. The family looks better if they are not commingled with talk of Satan and binding strong men and division. Also of noted difference: our passage today is the only real mention Mark makes of the family of Jesus.

Before we proceed I must confess a few breadcrumb sins. Talk of family and church makes me nervous. I love the stories of the holy family in Luke and Matthew. I am a big fan of Bethlehem and the shepherds and the magi and Mary pondering all these things; I like angelic visits. But so often when we speak of the church as a family, a spiritual home, the family of God, so often when we speak of the church and family we forget that families are really crazy. Yes, there are definitely good families and families that take picnics and all love one another. But then, not so much. It is hard to find a very positive image of the family in, say, Hamlet. A bit of dysfunction there.

My other breadcrumb sin is that this passage tempts me to go dark. This is the eighteenth piece of Mark out of 88. I mentioned to you when we began that I was going to do my best to stay away from the darkness in Mark. He is edgy and wild and can drag you down. With Mark it is easy to take on a deeply depressing and dark voice. I was tempted by this voice this week.

I saw the temptation when I read the first draft of the sermon. Very dark. There were stories of evolutionary theories meant to enslave and I recounted the Dred Scott decision of the supreme court where slaves were counted as 3/5 of a human being. And those were the cheery elements. Although I didn't include the image in the sermon, I kept seeing a horrible, violent scene from Flannery O'Connor as I wrote. I love Flannery O'Connor, but she is a tad bit dark shall we say. When she comes around, the chances are good the sirens of serious things are calling me, tempting me to chase the shadows of misery.

It all came clear to me though when I proofed our bulletin this week. As of late, Sue Beamon, our secretary, has been putting the text from Mark we read in the bulletin, she has been putting the whole text printed out in the back of the bulletin. This week she put in the first reading, the lovely image of Isaiah. When I asked her she said, "oh don't like one from Mark." "I am glad you feel free to leave it out," I said.

A good part of what Sue didn't like is the dismissal. "Who is my mother? Here is my mother." Yes, a case could be made that Jesus is simply extending the family of God to all people. Sure, a spiritual family where all live in love and a perfection of wills is a possible interpretation. All true. Yet, try preaching that on Mother's Day and you might find that it doesn't go over very well. It flies, yes; just not very far. I would be much happier to preach on Jesus healing the demon possessed on Mother's Day than I would be touching this passage with a ten-foot pole. Who is my mother? This is my mother. Oh mutiny on the deck; everyone seek shelter, fast.

So we have mental illness, talk of Satan, the dismissal of his mother and family and we were doing so well. Just a few weeks ago the stories of Mark led me to ponder Fred Rogers. Last week's sermon had a humorous anecdote about historical perspectives. I am not sure if even Mr. Rogers could save this passage from the darkness. Perhaps he would concur with Sue, just read Isaiah, it's nicer.

Perhaps the only way forward is the insight I was given with the years of Shakespeare with John: it is not what you know, it is what you can do. It is not who you are, even what you have earned or been given, it is what you can do. I believe the only way past the danger of the passage is to keep to the basic truth: the power of God is to do the good; we are reborn to do the will of God.

If we do not stick to this truth, we must apologize for the dismissal or chastise the family for the betrayal. Jesus dismisses his mother in such a way that we would demand an apology of anyone else. You can't say that to your mother.

And that his family sought to take him away was a betrayal. That they assumed he had lost his mind, this was a betrayal. Mark doesn't have nice stories of the birth so the full force of this comes through. His family was trying to take him away. They were embarrassed, ashamed.

If you work with families who endure mental illness you will find that blame and shame and chastisement are of little value and often quite destructive. Ironically, if you work with families who have not experienced this challenge they are often quite convinced that blame and shame have good effect.

Working with John for years, the head chaplain was exhausted. John was tough; he was arrogant and rude; he was demeaning and belittling. But to care for him meant you counted him as your own.

In the long rambles of aliens and princes and intelligence, rambles I must confess from time to time made me drift asleep, those rambles were really long descriptions of feeling abandoned by family. His illness made him other; his struggles with schizophrenia made him an alien in his hometown, his home, his skin. He needed someone to see him as brilliant and sharp so he could feel whole for a moment. I got to read a lot of Shakespeare. We both won.

Our passage today ever begs an apology. Who is my mother? Here is my mother. Terrible. No two ways about it. Just ask Sue and read Isaiah instead. Despite the darkness and edginess, though, I want to say there is a great lesson for us here, a path to keep. And it has to do with betrayal. Two weeks ago we reflected on the betrayal of Judas. We remembered how Jesus didn't reject Judas for his betrayal. He didn't cast him black, or shame him.

Although it is wrapped in the dismissal so it is hard to see, there is in our reading a moment where Jesus doesn't hate, doesn't blame, or castigate. He doesn't go outside and argue or bring them in and cause a scene. Mark's harshness actually lets us see the mercy. Who is my mother? This is a dismissal, but it is also a recognition that his family was trying, hoping, worrying. They weren't going at it in the right way, but they were still trying to do the right thing. What a different scene this would have been had Jesus stood before Mary and said, you are no longer my mother . . . who are you to me? In such a moment, he would have discarded her; he would have betrayed her. Jesus teaches his disciples not to discard people.

I don't feel like I made it out of this passage unscathed. I was tempted to go very dark. The first draft had a long list of ways we hurt each other with exclusion, how we betray the common humanity of each by making others less. While this is true and a terrible sin, much more than breadcrumbs, it is not the truth of our passage. The truth is very simple: it is not what you know that changes things; it is what you can do. Can you experience betrayal without seeking vengeance? Can you be treated shamefully and offer no bitter words in response? We know that is what Jesus calls us to do. We know, but can we do it?

We are a church family with all the good and the not so good that implies. We are people who believe in Jesus; we may not always be people who believe in each other. We are as Nietzsche claimed, human, all too human. We are given a precarious beauty and fragile joy. So to abide in them let us count each other as better, care for one another as a beloved, and remember the one who suffers is our brother, our sister. Let us know what is right and have the courage to do the right. Amen.