

**Sermon**  
**Millerton and Corydon UMC**

**1 Samuel 8:4-20; Mark 3:20-35**  
**June 6, 2021**

In the Old Testament, beginning with the calling of Abraham, God has been trying a new thing with the Hebrew people. God is trying to create a nation, a people, for whom all their existence, all their structures, all their behavior, goes back to God. God has declared that they are unique, that they are chosen, and that in all they do, from the way they interact with others of their own people as well as with their relationships with foreigners, all the way down to the clothes they wear and the food they eat, God will set the rules. They will not be a typical nation. They will be different. They will be something new.

The Hebrew people tried. Not always willingly, but they tried. And God took care of them in wonderful and miraculous ways – like parting the Red Sea and destroying the walls of Jericho. But it wasn't **all** wonderful and miraculous. God had to part the Red Sea because they had been enslaved in Egypt. Jericho's wall fell because they had been wandering long in the wilderness without a home. Trying to be God's people in this new way had brought them a lot of grief and a lot of uncertainty. By now, frankly, they were tired of it. They were tired of being something new. So they went to the prophet Samuel, the one who was giving them God's words and directions, and asked him to appoint a traditional king for them. God and Samuel warn them that a king would do all sorts of things they won't like, but the people were determined to have a regular king, so they could be "like other nations."

Jesus, too, was doing something new. At the time of this episode, he had been travelling around Galilee, teaching and preaching and doing **lots** of healing and casting out demons. People were coming from all over to hear him and to be healed, but there were also a lot of people who were hostile to what he was saying and doing. All these crowds of people – the supporters and the disciples, the seekers and the curious, the opponents and the detractors – were following him around, crowding around him, pushing and pulling and shouting and pleading. It was pretty scary. When Jesus got home, surrounded by this mob, his family tried to bring him in, to restrain him, to keep him from being so unconventional, so different, so unsettling. Lots of commentators are hard on his family, but I understand them: they love him and they fear for him. They don't want him hurt. And being radically different, not like other people, can get one hurt.

Sometimes doing things the way everybody else does them is tempting! But Jesus is doing something new.

Mark doesn't tell us explicitly what Jesus was teaching the people who came to see him. He tells them that he, Jesus, has been sent by God, that they should repent and believe, that their sins are forgiven. That's all Mark has related so far. But because we have the other three gospels, we know the rest: that God loves all of us, that we must love each other, that people are more important than rules, and that we need to help, forgive, and care for each other. Simple as that may sound (and it is far from simple to do!), it wasn't popular with the authorities. "People are more important than rules?" If you are in charge of the rules, that sounds like nonsense. Pernicious nonsense. "Their sins are forgiven?" If people's sins are already forgiven, how do we keep them in line? "We need to love everyone?" If we love everybody, how will we be able

to keep inferiors in their place? And what's the use of being the chosen people if God loves everybody else, too? So the religious leaders, the scribes, have come from Jerusalem to see what Jesus is about, and they don't like it. "He's possessed by a demon himself," they say. "He can only cast out demons because Beelzebul, prince of demons, is working through him." Subtext: don't listen to this guy. What he's saying is wrong. What he's saying is bad.

Jesus focuses right in on the flaw in that. "If I'm a demon, possessed by a demon, why in the world would I be casting out other demons? Why would I be weakening my side? Satan can't cast out Satan – Satan wouldn't cast out Satan. Satan isn't going to possess people and also remove that possession. If a house is divided against itself, the house itself can't survive. If one part of a nation is going in a drastically different direction than the rest of the nation, the nation will be torn apart."

If a family has two heirs and one is determined to tear down the family farm to put up an apartment complex and the other heir is determined to save the family farm as it is and neither will budge, the family is going to have a rift. If one partner in a marriage is determined to move to Boston to take a dream job and the other is determined to stay in Iowa to continue the family business, that marriage may well end.

But, of course, we all know that. We all come up against these situations. Sometimes, most of the time, they aren't catastrophic. Compromise is possible. One side cares more about the whole than about its own position. Things can be worked out.

But sometimes these conflicts strike at the core of a relationship, a lifestyle, a belief system, existence. Sometimes compromise is impossible. And when that happens, either the house falls or one side must defeat, destroy the other.

When the stakes are that high it is vital to understand what is really going on in the dispute. Many times we can't just look at what people are saying; we must look at what they do and the meaning and the consequences of it. To give a trivial but understandable example – my husband and I may both say "the dishes need to be washed". We agree. But if I go upstairs to read a book, it is clear that what I mean is "you should wash the dishes." If he goes to watch a ballgame on TV, it is clear that he means "you need to wash the dishes." Our words agree. But our actions show we are in conflict. And the dishes don't get washed.

So, going back to Jesus and the scribes. The conflict has nothing to do with what Satan might be doing. The conflict is about what Jesus is doing.

What does Jesus want? Essentially, Jesus wants people to know how much God loves them, to know that God forgives their sins, to have people God love with all their being, and to have them obey God's commandments to love and help each other. That's what Jesus's message is – that's what the gospels are all about. Jesus preaches and teaches that and Jesus models loving, caring, and accepting by what he does.

What do the scribes want? Remember, they are the leaders of the religious establishment. I am sure that if we could ask them what they want they'd say much the same thing Jesus says: we

want people to love God. We want them to know they are God's chosen and to obey God's commandments – many of which, by the way, outline behavior that protects and cares for others, including strangers. Very similar to what Jesus wants.

So why are they attacking someone who is preaching what they claim to believe?

As we see throughout the New Testament, most of the scribes don't really want what I think they'd say they want. What they actually want is to maintain their power and authority as the rule setters, as the holy people. They want a religious community that is structured, layered, restricted. Other people need to respect the leaders' authority and stay in their place. People give to God by giving to the temple or the synagogue. The scribes and priests are the only ones who can tell you if you're forgiven or not – and if your life has problems it is probably your own fault. The scribes want to tell people what to do. They know, they absolutely **know** that God loves them best. That is the "house" they really represent. The scribes' behavior throughout the New Testament shows this.

Jesus is against what they are for, just as they are against what Jesus wants: that people love God, love and help each other, and realize that God loves and forgives us all.

So what does all this mean for us, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Christians in a world Jesus and the scribes couldn't have imagined?

There is a lot of conflict today, in our nation, in our communities, in the church. Houses are divided and some will not stand. It is vital that as we navigate through the mess that we look not just at what people **say** but at what they do and at the consequences of what they do or what they say should be done. For example, if a group of Iowa lawmakers were to say "we want to increase voting security" and advocate requiring that all absentee ballots be notarized, the consequences would be to make it much harder for to vote absentee. A large number of people, including many older Iowans, would be disenfranchised. (In 2016, over 50% of Iowans 65 and over voted absentee.) No one would say "we want to keep older people from voting," but that would be the logical consequence of such a requirement. The idea of "election security" sounds good. "Making it hard for seniors to vote" doesn't. And "telling seniors that their voices aren't important" is worse. But that would be the consequence.

As Christians, we need to look at consequences, always, in light of Jesus's teachings. If we support laws that make it harder for people to have enough to eat, are we obeying Jesus's instruction to feed the hungry? If we support institutions that limit the access that people in groups have to opportunity or to education, are we living out Jesus's message that we need to love all our neighbors as God loves us? All our neighbors, whether we agree with them or not. All our neighbors, whether we like and understand them or not. All our neighbors, whether we fear them or not. All our neighbors, whether we approve of their behavior or not. All our neighbors.

Jesus was all about making people's lives better. He fed them, he healed them, he welcomed them, he accepted them. He made them think. He made them want to help each other. He showed them that God loved them – no matter what.

At the end of our passage from Mark, Jesus's family come to where he is and call to him. The crowd tells him "Your family is asking for you." Jesus replies "Who is my family? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Jesus expanded the meaning of "family". Family is not created only by sharing bloodlines and legal relationships. Family includes those who share our fundamental core values. If we follow Jesus in doing the will of God – making people and people's lives better, sharing the love of God in how we treat others – we are Jesus's family. We are part of the realm of God – a kingdom that is not divided.

Let us pray: Loving God, when the Hebrews turned away from your leadership and demanded a king, you still loved them. When the scribes suggested that Jesus was possessed of an unclean spirit, you still loved them. And when we mess up, make bad choices, don't think, don't care, don't love – you still love us. Help us to respond to your constant and everlasting love by treating all your people with respect and caring. Help us to work together as part of your realm of love. Amen.