

Mark 3:20-35

Let me tell you what Jesus had been up to right before today's reading. He had had dinner at Levi's house with a bunch of tax collectors and sinners. He had picked grain on the sabbath because he and his disciples were hungry. He had healed a man with a withered arm, calling the bluff of some Pharisees who wanted to see if he'd further dishonor the sabbath. So people were concerned and confused, which sets the stage for today. It's a charged moment, and tensions are high because Jesus has been acting with authority in a way that challenges the established order. When his family tries to restrain him, making the excuse that he's out of his mind, they may simply be trying to protect him and themselves from being driven out of town.

The scribes from Jerusalem then pronounce that Jesus has been doing the works of the devil. "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of demons he casts out demons." And Jesus says no, that doesn't make sense; how can Satan cast out Satan? Then he says something that we often find mysterious: "People will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but **whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness.**" What does that mean, "blasphemes against the Holy Spirit?" I think it's of a piece with something he says in Mark 9:41, "**Whoever** gives you a cup of cold water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will by no means lose their reward." In other words, acts of compassion and kindness are by definition from the Holy Spirit; it doesn't matter whether the person giving you the water is doing so as a Christian or not. Any act of generosity is by definition inspired by the Holy Spirit. The scribes from Jerusalem are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit **by** accusing Jesus of doing the work of Beelzebub when he heals people and sits at table with sinners. To call what is of God, of the devil, is to sin against the Holy Spirit.

Why is Jesus' work so alarming, and why is there such strong social pressure to stop him, such that even his own family tries to stifle him?

We cannot be human without community, and we cannot be community without some shared sense of identity. So there are strong social pressures to regulate our behavior and get us all to conform to particular views of right and wrong. Right: regular church attendance. Wrong: staying up late eating pizza with sinners. Right: reading the Bible. Wrong: watching movies with torrid love scenes. And these standards are policed as they were in Jesus' day, by the threat of ostracism and public shaming if you fail to measure up. We want to belong, so we develop a set of criteria by which to determine who *doesn't* belong, so we know we're not them. We aspire to holiness— seeking to love God with all our heart and mind and strength— but sometimes we degenerate into excluding the ones who don't fit.

Jesus has been breaking the norms, in the run-up to this story. **Jesus came precisely to save us from such a deathly culture, but in the process of shining the light on it and exposing it for what was, he had to reveal and face what it will do to anyone who tries to love it back to life and health.** It's like the way a drowning person will try to resist someone who comes to save them, kicking and fighting back. No sooner did we see a little glimpse of life in a withered hand restored, but "the Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him." The truth that Jesus means us to see is that **a house divided against itself cannot stand.** A community that relies on excluding someone in order to be community will never ultimately work. It can't truly be community. And in fact, Satan depends on us perpetuating this dynamic of excluding and othering; there is no Satan, no opponent, when human beings organize themselves in another way — for example, the alternative way

that Jesus has come to offer us by letting himself become the one accused and cast out.

Bringing the kingdom, Jesus creates a new family made of everybody. When he is “canceled” for that, he neither goes away nor cancels his opponents—he breaks the chain of victimization and retaliation by both dying and rising. But I’m getting ahead of the story.

Anne Lamott tells a lot of stories about her tendency to cast certain people as “other.” One that I always remember is a pretty old one, from her 1999 book “Traveling Mercies.” At that time her son Sam was in first grade and she was single, poor, and not staying on top of things real well. Another one of the moms seemed to have it together in every possible way, and also had a Reagan bumper sticker on her car, which definitely labeled her as “other.” This woman was kind to Anne, but in ways that rankled, like telling her, after she’d failed to notice that Wednesday was early out day and she’d failed to pick Sam up, “I just want you to know, Annie, that if you have any other questions about how the classroom works, I’d really love to be there for you.” “I smiled back at her. I thought such awful thoughts that I cannot even say them out loud because they would make Jesus want to drink gin straight out of the cat dish.” (p. 131)

Her enemy’s son was reading proficiently, and Sam was not reading, really at all. Sam’s friend got 100% on his arithmetic test and Sam got two wrong. “Help,” said Anne to God, and heard nothing back but seemed to be seeing a lot of nudges about forgiveness popping up around her. She went to pick Sam up from a playdate with her enemy’s son and had to wait awkwardly and uncomfortably with the other mom while Sam looked for his backpack. Finally he showed up and she went to help him put on his shoes.

As I loosened the laces on one shoe, without realizing what I was doing, I sneaked a look into the other boy’s sneaker—to see what size shoe he wore. To see how my kid lined

up in shoe size.

And I finally got it.

The veil dropped. I got that I am as mad as a hatter. I saw that *I* was the one worried that my child wasn't doing well enough in school. That *I* was the one who thought I was out of shape. And that I was trying to get her to carry all this for me because it hurt too much to carry it myself.

I wanted to kiss her on both cheeks, apologize for all the self-contempt I'd been spewing out into the world, all the bad juju I'd been putting on her . . . This was *me*. *She* was the one pouring me more tea, she was the one who'd been taking care of my son. She was the one who seemed to have already forgiven me for writing a book in which I trashed her political beliefs; like God and certain parents do, forgiven me almost before I'd even done anything I needed to be forgiven for. It's like the faucets are already flowing before you even hold out your cup to be filled. Before, giveness.

What Anne realized was that she was "othering" this other mother for being "better" than her because it hurt too much that Anne herself was not up to the standards she had set for herself. She had created an "out group" of mothers, or an adversary, where none existed, to comfort herself for a judgment that nobody had made. The division between them was all about her, and when she recognized it, it ceased to exist, just like Satan ceases to exist when we make friends out of enemies.

Jesus looks at those who sit around him and says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Since Jesus has already declared the folks sitting encircled around him as his family, then doing the will of God is not some impossible dream. Doing the will of God is accepting Jesus' works of mercy as coming from the power of God and not Satan. Doing the will of God is gathering around Jesus instead of conspiring against him or coming to fetch him as a lunatic. [Mark Davis]

We live in a world of real and consequential and cruel divisions, and we need to take actions that involve recognizing what's wrong and who's doing what's wrong. We need to take actions for justice that will make people mad. But also we're children of the living God, who is

defined by love. The 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr talks about this dilemma when he states that responsible Christianity involves reflection and understanding of the social, political and economic reality in which faith is lived. But, he also says that in all of our informed understanding of human reality **we must never close the door to the possibility of God's intervention that can make things different. It is the possibility of God's intervention that keeps Christian hope alive.**

The scribes in Mark's story were without hope. They were without hope not because they lacked knowledge or understanding, nor because they were bad men. They were without hope because when God showed up in their lives through Jesus the friend of sinners, they turned and rejected him. They called him evil rather than seeing the divine good in him and his actions. They tried to hold things together by sacrificing those who upset the order. The sinners who sat down with Jesus at Levi's table had hope.

Holly Near sings a song called "I Am Willing" that speaks to our Christian call to persist in the works of the Holy Spirit, despite labels. I offer it as a closing prayer today.

I am open and I am willing
To be hopeless would seem so strange
It dishonors those who go before us
So lift me up to the light of change

There is hurting in my family
There is sorrow in my town
There is panic in the nation
There is wailing the whole world round

May the children see more clearly
May the elders be more wise
May the winds of change caress us

Even though it burns our eyes

Give me a mighty oak to hold my confusion
Give me a desert to hold my fears
Give me a sunset to hold my wonder
Give me an ocean to hold my tears

<https://genius.com/Holly-near-i-am->

[willing-lyrics](#)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v>

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