

A SERMON PREACHED ON SUNDAY, JUNE 10, 2018

AT BETHANY BEACH CHRISTIAN CHURCH, BETHANY BEACH, DE

A friend of my wrote to me a few weeks past, relating how prior to Easter, her five-year-old grandson had joined the other children in line at the mall waiting to sit on the Easter Bunny's lap. When it was his turn, Jake didn't move; he just stared.

"Don't you want to sit on the bunny's lap?" she asked.

"No!" he shouted. "There's a man in his mouth!"ⁱ

I thought about this story as I read the gospel designated for today that deals with both family matters and weird happenings. We are early in *The Gospel of Mark* and Jesus has set himself down in a local home to have a meal. But such a large crowd gathers when they learn he is in town that neither he nor his disciples have enough room to eat peaceably. This is when we learn that his family is nearby, so they come to try and speak some sense into him. The weird part is that they think he is out of his mind (not full of the Holy Spirit, as Mark would have us believe), so they come to take charge of him (the family part). Just what they thought they could accomplish is beyond me. Yet that is not what fascinates me about this text. I wonder just who this family of his is. I know that the church has celebrated The Feast of the Holy Family on the Sunday after Christmas, on whatever day of the week it falls, since the early 1600s. Family in this context meant Joseph, Mary, and Jesus, and the idea of the feast day was to commemorate their holiness as a family unit. However, by the time of Jesus' adult life, it is assumed that Joseph is dead, so the family picture here would include just Mary and Jesus, except that the text says that his brothers were present. We have discussed this enlargement of the family unit in our Lenten classes, but I don't want to miss the teaching moment here to reemphasize that Jesus had brothers and sisters, a factor that may be in conflict with Mary's ever virginity proclaimed by the church in the 5th century. Here you have an important theological stance attempting to rewrite Scripture, something rarely attempted and less often successful. For at least 500 years, however, and in many parts of the church to the present, Jesus has blood brothers, either half- or full-blooded siblings (he has sisters, too, but I'll leave them out of this discussion until later). Who are they?

According to tradition and several biblical texts, namely those in *The Gospel of Mark* (6:3) and *Matthew* (13:55-56), they are James, Joses, Judas (aka Jude, the patron saint of lost causes) and

Simon (aka The Zealot). The most common belief put forward by the church fathers is that these men were Joseph's children from a previous marriage. We learn in Scripture that by tradition Joseph was a widower, but no biblical texts seek to explain if he had any children nor why they were not listed as present at such an important event as, say, the crucifixion. Presumably if they were in hiding along with the disciples, the storyline would be that they had a lot to fear, too, since everyone knew just who the potential guilty parties were. In other words, if the disciples were in hiding so must be the male members of his family. And it cannot be an accident that Jesus had brothers whose names were identical to those on the list of his disciples. Long story short: Jesus probably had at least four biological brothers or half brothers, and neither the gospel text nor tradition presents a better case in explaining just how they were related, but suffice it to say that there was overlap in who the disciples were and who his brothers were. (There is also a quite well-founded tradition that the four named were his cousins, sons of a woman named Mary [who went to the tomb and was a witness to the resurrection, and that she was Mary's older sister] and a man named Clopas [often identified as Joseph's brother.] But this is too much to take on in one sermon; you might say "it's hard to know the players without a scorecard" and you'd be right; it's very confusing.) So why bother making the case? Only to say that the church changed what it believed and taught along the way in order to suit its purposes; when it does so, we are put in a mind to wonder why. At least I do, and in this case, I wonder if it has any effect on this morning's story. Perhaps it does. What is true is that it assumes we know who the players are, which we don't. And that makes me uneasy. I like to know who is involved and why.

Just to stoke the fire a bit, our Lenten study group was made aware of a more modern addition to the proposed family list: Thomas (the doubting one). Two apocryphal books, *The Gospel of Thomas* and *The Acts of Thomas*, from the *Nag Hammadi* collection of 1945, infer that Thomas was not only one of the disciples, but that he may have been Jesus' brother, the one they called Joses; and since Joses' full name included the name "Didymus," which in Aramaic means "twin," he therefore had a twin brother, who according to the just cited texts was Jesus. Well, we cannot even begin to find the time to discuss all the ramifications of that theory, but it is important to know that it was a much believed possibility in the early first four centuries of the church.

Just so we don't leave who claimed to be part of Jesus' genealogy out there, early tradition also says that Jesus had two sisters; some say their names were Mary and Salome; other traditions say they were Lydia and Assia. The NT writers did not say what the names are, only that Jesus had sisters; if it be true, this causes the same issues as in the discussion of the identity of the brothers' controversy....

Whew! Now that we have gotten that out of the way, we can deal with the second half of the story, and Jesus' seeming rejection of family (or perhaps, one could say, his attempt to enlarge the concept of what family means). Should Jesus' family have been hurt by how he treated them and how he referred to them, or did they write it off as just the ravings of a crazy lunatic (we all have one in the family, no?) Perhaps they had what was coming to them. After all, we learn in *The Gospel of John* (Chp. 7) that Jesus' brothers do not believe in him. Therefore what type of response do they expect from him? They are motivated more by the pressures of society and the religious authorities than they are by his authority. And authority is key here. Jesus goes on to show them that he is in charge, not Satan, especially when they try to infer that he himself is possessed. So Jesus rejects what connects him to his family – the blood bond -- and in the end finds himself a larger family, and one that has faith in him, i.e., not only the disciples but the crowds as well. As Harper Lee, author of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, writes in her novel, "You can choose your friends but you sho' can't choose your family..."ⁱⁱ Jesus seems to have learned this the hard way like most of us have: through personal experience. Which brought to mind this humorous story: Joe asked God, "How much is a penny worth in heaven?" God replied, "\$1 million." Joe asked, "How long is a minute in heaven?" God said, "One million years." Joe asked for a penny. God said, "Sure, in a minute." So you see, the devil is in the details. ...ⁱⁱⁱ

Having examined the relationship between Jesus and his family and the crowds, it's time to get down to the gist of what concerned them so. It seems that the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons." Jesus laughs at them, using a logic that would fuel hundreds of sermons throughout the ensuing years, namely that a house divided against itself cannot stand. That is to say, it would be ridiculous to think he was in league with Satan to cast out demons, for how can a demon cast itself out of a possessed body? Then he tells them that they are blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, a sin that cannot easily be forgiven. He said this because they were saying, "He has an impure spirit."

So I ask you, who knew that blaspheming the Holy Spirit was a sin? How does anyone even do it? I guess we do it when we seek to connect with evil in ourselves and in others, rather than seeing the goodness that abounds in all of creation. You may think this farfetched, but I would

go so afield as to say when we litter or don't recycle, for instance, we are sinning against the spirit of Creation, which is the Holy Spirit itself. Trash left on the ground or improperly sorted for disposal disrupts and destroys creation. If the Holy Spirit is the author of creation, we are involved in egregious acts against it on a daily basis. The same could be said about the denial of global warming and the promotion of creationism. Have we ever thought that we grieve the Holy Spirit when we are not in tune with it and the way it operates in our lives? There's a lot to think about here. For if sin is whatever gets in the way of our vision of God, we have much work to do to move all the trash, literal and figural, that is in the way. Not only might we never see God going on the way we have, we may never even get to experience God and God's beloved community if we continue on the way we are. Our entry into the kingdom of God or its entry into our lives is dependent upon how we interface with the Spirit. I dare say connecting to the Spirit is probably not high on our priority list when we rise in the morning. But maybe it should be!

We now fully see what is at stake in the gospel. The preacher and theologian Meda Stamper concludes the thoughts around it by offering this: "Now Jesus makes clear, in the form of a parable, the scope of what he is doing in his freeing of the demon-possessed. Jesus is coming to plunder Satan's household and bring about Satan's end, not by division from within but by stealth and force from without. Jesus, who was stronger than John the Baptist, is stronger than the strong man Satan, too.

Jesus' stealthy binding of the powers of evil ultimately undermines Satan so completely that even when he appears to have succeeded in destroying Jesus in the crucifixion, the very destruction of the Son issues not in defeat but in the mysterious victory of God."^{iv} So, the casting out of demons that Jesus is about is to show that God is control of the world, and that Jesus, as his Son/agent will carry out the plan till all other plans have disappeared. That includes our own plans for ourselves. The casting out is meant to show that **God** has a part in our plans, and will remove whatever is in the way to help achieve them. Therefore, we do a daily dance with the Trinity that moves and informs our very being, whether we realize it or not. And if we can be in synch with it, oh what a life we can live!

Remember it's a dance with the Trinity and not the devil. As the mother cow said to the baby cow, I look forward to seeing your mooooooves!

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://www.rd.com/joke/grandson-smart-egg/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/138836-you-can-choose-your-friends-but-you-sho-can-t-choose>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://jokes.cc.com/funny-god/nsajd3/-1-million-in-heaven>

^{iv} https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1315