

Gospel reading: Mark 3:20-35

[Jesus went home;] ²⁰and the crowd came together again, so that [Jesus and the disciples] could not even eat. ²¹When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.” ²²And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” ²³And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, “How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷But 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.

²⁸“Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; ²⁹but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”—³⁰for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”

³¹Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³²A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” ³³And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” ³⁴And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

Sermon by Pastor Nancy M. Raabe

As Bill and I prepare to say goodbye to you, in order to live closer to our daughter Margaret and her husband Greg, I have been thinking about family dynamics. Mainly I’ve been thanking God that this move is something that they, too, like the idea of. Bill has been joking about the 45-minute “buffer zone” that he thinks Greg wants between our house and theirs, so that we can’t barge in any old time like the parents on “Everybody Loves Raymond” kept doing. Actually though, when we were first starting to look for housing there, Greg discovered units for sale in the next building over from theirs, and he latched onto the idea that we could be next door neighbors. But as it turned out we ended up with exactly that 45-minute buffer zone that Bill still thinks Greg wants.

How blessed we are that we get along well with our children. This is not true for families where arguments evolve into long-term dysfunction that leaves gaping holes in the family fabric, for generations, even. My father’s family was prone to these; his two aunts had not spoken to each other for more than 50 years because long ago one had accused the other’s son of having stolen something from her house. And just yesterday our son Martin and his wife Bekah told me of a friend with a charming child, the first in that generation, who her parents have not yet met because they are estranged. Imagine refusing to see your only grandchild.

If it sounded from today’s Gospel that such a situation might be brewing in Jesus’ own family, I think you’re right. It is early in Jesus’ ministry. The curtain opens onto a wild scene of healings and exorcisms in which Jesus making good on his proclamation that the kingdom of God has come near. The healings start with Peter’s mother-in-law, then literally everybody in sight who was sick or possessed by demons, then lepers, paralytics, and others, all in dramatic fashion.

Massive crowds begin to follow Jesus everywhere. After calling his 12 disciples, Jesus tries to escape into his home to share a group meal, but the crowds make this impossible.

Into the midst of this chaos, Jesus' family shows up. They are embarrassed by the spectacle he is making and try to pull him away. It's not only that Jesus is challenging the Jewish authorities, giving the family a bad name, but they apparently agree with what others are saying--that he has gone out of his mind. No wonder at the end of our reading that Jesus all but disowns them.

Then the scribes show up, powerful religious leaders who are committed to preserving the existing system of authority. Once they see what's happening, they want nothing more than to be rid of this troublemaker.

So they hurl at Jesus the most serious accusation possible—that he is an agent of Satan. How bizarre, we might think! But course, this is what they would say—because when people who gain power through oppression are threatened, they resort to false accusations that try to divert attention from the truth, because they know that the truth will lay bare the deception that allows them to cling to power.

What is the truth in this case? That the Messiah in fact has come, just as the Old Testament prophets said he would. But the scribes refuse to see it -- or at least to acknowledge it -- because to do so would mean they'd have to give up their power over the Jewish temple system that exalts and enriches them. In other words, they are purposely denying the fulfillment of their very own scriptures in a desperate attempt to stay in control.

Jesus, of course, is far too clever for them. He quickly shatters their claim that he is possessed by Satan by pointing out that Satan would not be casting out his own agents. But more importantly, the scribes' accusation gives Jesus the opportunity to lay bare his mission statement in Mark through a shocking parable depicting a home invasion: "No one can enter a strong man's house and plunder his property," Jesus says, "without first tying up the strong man; then indeed the house can be plundered."

The strong man is Satan, who still has the world in his grip. The house Jesus is talking about is the entire system of authoritarianism and oppression that that deprives common people of the fullness of life while enriching those in power. And the act of plundering is the great reversal set in motion by the coming of God's kingdom, in which the powerful are brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up, the hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. What is he saying is that an alternate reign must displace the one that rules now.

And who is stronger than the strong man? Only Jesus.

The gospel is not only the good news, it is also the good news from the battlefield. This good news is that Jesus is always there for us in the midst of the struggle. He is there in the midst of what the world calls failure to pick us up and remind us that God forgives us and loves us fully and completely, just as we are. Jesus is there in the midst of family dysfunction to show us how to be ministers of reconciliation. Jesus is there in the midst of illness to make sure we know that we have eternal life in him, not only forever but now—eternal life in the present because nothing, not even a terminal diagnosis, can separate us from the love of God. Satan may still be the strong man, but Jesus is there in the midst of the struggle to show us the way, to be the truth, and to bring us to the fullness of life that is ours in him, by his Father and through the Spirit. And there will be no compromise or peace until Christ has won his battle on our behalf.

The book of Revelation lays out the great vision of how Satan will finally be overcome. But in the meantime, the church as Christ's body is engaged, if you will, in plundering the devil's house and bringing in the kingdom. My prayer for you, as we part ways, is that God continues, day by day, to renew you for this great work of ministry.

3 Today, as then, Christ summons us to dare
to follow boldly and his work to share,
to help and heal the sick, the blind, the lame,
declaring to the world his holy name.

Amen.