

Sometimes You Just Need To Take a Stand



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Graduation Sunday

Mark 3: 20-35

Then he went home; ²⁰ and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. ²¹ When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." ²² And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem said, "He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons." ²³ And he called them to him, and spoke to them in parables, "How can Satan cast out Satan? ²⁴ If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. ²⁵ And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. ²⁶ And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come. ²⁷ But 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; ²⁹ but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin"— ³⁰ for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

³¹ Then his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called him. ³² A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to him, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you." ³³ And he replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" ³⁴ And looking at those who sat

around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! ³⁵ Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

I am one of those pastors who is grateful for the lectionary. The lectionary provides a 3-year cycle of scriptures for pastors to draw from rather than a pastor randomly choosing scripture Sunday by Sunday. What the lectionary does is challenge the pastor and the church to look at passages that we might otherwise gloss over such as this scripture passage from Mark for today. What we see is a horrible event right after Jesus returns home where Jesus is being compared to Beelzebub by the scribes and Jesus' own family seek to draw his attention away from his purpose in this very raw exchange.

But before we jump into this event, let's look at this in the context of what the gospel writer Mark would have us to know about Jesus and his mission right from the very beginning. The gospel writer Mark is not going to waste any time. He jumps in letting the reader of his gospel know that Jesus, God made flesh, is putting a stake in the ground allowing people to see God's intention for God's world. Because God's intention for us is so different from the understanding of the people, Jesus is seen as a radical, as a boundary-breaking figure. Jesus has already touched a man with an unclean spirit (something that the priestly laws denied); Jesus has touched a leper paving the way for the leper's inclusion; Jesus healed and by His touch transformed people making them whole and drawing them into the reign of God. Jesus was transforming lives, gathering people, accepting them in a way they never had been before.

Mark reports that his boundary breaking includes people who come to see Jesus from beyond the Jordan even Idumea (a region of non-Jews) and territories that are an increasing sociological distance from Jerusalem. There are people being drawn to Jesus that are beyond the boundaries of Jewish space.

For the scribes, what they see is the ground shifting toward the impure and unholy.

We need to remember that as Mark penned his stories of Jesus, Jerusalem was under siege. The first Jewish-Roman war was either taking place or had just taken place with the destruction of the Temple in 70 A.D. The Jewish war was aimed at removing the Gentile presence from the land. The emulation of Jesus by Jews who accommodated Gentile interests were considered traitors by many and could easily have been assassinated. Mark himself, who was writing these stories of inclusion, and Mark's audience were indeed on dangerous ground.

As we approach our scripture for the day, not only are the scribes referring to Jesus as Beelzebub (Beelzebub being one of the chief deities of the area – a Canaanite god of fertility and fire - name translated means Lord of the fly) Jesus' own family perceives that Jesus has lost His mind. The Pharisees seek to denigrate Jesus by using a term that clearly claims Jesus is Satan.

I can't imagine a more personal attack than being in one's own hometown and accused of being the worst of the worst and then having one's own family complicit with the authorities but likely without their knowledge. Little does Jesus' family know that they are playing right into the hands of the authorities by also trying to pull Jesus away by removing him from this situation.

Jesus knows that sometimes you just have to stand. Jesus stands by telling a parable. Jesus makes the point that his miracles oust demons from their human hosts which Satan would never do, therefore, Jesus was acting on another power – not the power of Satan but the power of God. Mark's greater point also gets made. The choice to stand with Jesus sometimes can put us at odds with others even those who are the closest to us. Choosing God's path might mean leaving family and family expectations behind. Jesus says that those who are with him are his family. There is only one restriction to being part of Jesus' family that has nothing to do with purity, holiness, or ethnicity

but a willingness to do the will of God. Imagine people from Idumea and those beyond the Jordan hearing this welcome to be family with God in Jesus. Remember Mark is telling this story during the first Jewish-Roman war or just on the heels of it.

I think what Jesus has done is set a model for all of us. Sometimes we just have to stand.

Walter Brueggemann wrote in his book, Mandate to Difference, that the church's work is the gathering of the 'others', not the ones that belong obviously to our social tribe or class or race. As Brueggemann looks at the prophetic book of Isaiah, he makes the proposition that the church is now God's agent for gathering exiles – those exiles who have been made by the force of our society, those who are rejected, ostracized and labeled as outsiders but also those whom the world may judge normal, conventional, and establishment types.

Ministry, Brueggemann says, is doing what Jesus was doing in this text. Jesus was gathering, embracing, welcoming home all sorts and conditions of people. The ministry of gathering is one to which God has been committed to forever. What distinguishes God from the other gods is not power, but God's attentiveness to societal justice – to love the stranger (Deut 10:19); to opening our hands to the poor and needy (Deut 15:11) and to provide for the alien or orphan and the widow (Deut 24: 17-22).

Jesus knew that sometimes you just have to stand for the welcoming and gathering of people. In Mark's writing of his gospel, he was taking a stand for the reign of God. Walter Brueggemann wrote knowing that the church must stand for the welcoming and gathering of people no matter how the world would judge them. We all are called to take a stand as well.

When the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church endured a bombing that killed four beautiful, innocent little girls while they were there to learn of Jesus in September, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King had to summon the strength, the courage and the fortitude

to stand in that place and deliver a eulogy to the families and friends who had suffered a great tragedy. In his eulogy, Dr. King said that he was standing for these children who all had something to say to us in their deaths. Dr. King said that their deaths said to us, "that we must be concerned not merely about who murdered them, but about the system, the way of life, the philosophy which produced the murderers. Their death says to us that we must work passionately and unrelentingly for the realization of the American dream." (A Call To Conscience)

Each one of us may have our own stories of times when we had to take a stand. It might have been within our families, within our workplaces, within even our own churches. I have my own stories of standing both as a woman and as a female minister.

I look at our graduates who are here today and already see the strength and courage in them to stand in their own truths, knowing that they will continue to stand as we serve a gathering God – a God who seeks to gather us in, to welcome us, to love us regardless of the labels that the world wants to put upon us. A God who stands with us as we stand for the refugee, the ostracized, the homeless, the dejected and rejected.

We stand in our truth just as Jesus stood in his truth. Jesus' truth was that he was God incarnate, the Creator, redeemer and sustainer of this world. His truth was that God sees us as family. His truth is that we become family by loving and welcoming, working for justice, seeking healing and restoration and helping to transform our society.

Jesus' truth is our truth too. There is no shortage in this world of those who would label, those who would rage with hatred and anger, those who would oppress and exclude, those who feel threatened as the culture changes, and those who willingly believe the worst rather than seek the goodness of God which is present in every moment of our lives.

Jesus knows that standing in his truth is never easy. So Jesus takes us to a table so that our very souls can be fed by common elements such as bread and juice and yet nurtured by God's own Spirit, God's Holy Spirit. As each one of us may face those times when we take a stand – we stand knowing that we stand in the truth of the gospel – we stand knowing that we do not stand alone – that the God of all creation stands with us.

Let us pray: Holy God, thank you for modeling for us what it is to take a stand even when it may be very difficult to do so. Thank you for showing us that even as we take our stands, we can teach your truth. Feed us this day at your table empowering us for those moments that come where we will take our own stand for righteousness and justice. Amen