



SERMONS THAT WORK

Pentecost 2 Proper 5 (B)

Human and Divine

RCL: 1 Samuel 8:4-11, (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15); Psalm 138; 2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1; Mark 3:20-35

“We look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” (2 Corinthians 4:18)

In the Gospel of Mark, the emphasis is on Jesus as prophet, healer, and miracle worker – the human Jesus whose work can be seen. Yet this Jesus is indeed the Son of God, that which cannot be seen but is eternal. In today’s passage, we have it all. Human Jesus misunderstood and at times impatient, and divine Jesus, actor in the eternal drama of good versus evil, conqueror of Satan. And, to complete the trinity, Jesus acts as the agent of the Holy Spirit.

By the time this passage begins, chapter three of Mark has established Jesus as prophet, teacher, and healer. He has cast out unclean spirits and appointed twelve apostles to aid him in his work.

Ironically, in Mark 3:11, the unclean spirits recognize Jesus as the Son of God, while in today’s passage, the crowd, the family, and the scribes just do not get him at all. “He has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons.” They see him as out of his mind, possibly even possessed by evil spirits himself. As he has done so many times in his earthly life, Jesus is called to respond to the confusion of friend and foe alike. He teaches, in a parable about Satan, and calls the scribes and his family to account.

The structure of the passage is interesting, important, and enlightening. We have a story within a story: the controversy with the scribes about exorcism and the parable of defeating Satan inserted into an episode about Jesus’ family. The structure is called *chiastic*, meaning that ideas are introduced in order, then developed in reverse order. In this case: Crowd, family, and scribes are introduced in that order. The parable of Satan is the story at the center. Then, in reverse order, scribes, family, and crowd are addressed.

The structure is important and enlightening for the way it focuses on the central idea at the heart of the pattern – the conflict with Satan, the cosmic battle of good and evil. First, the crowd gathers, followers of Jesus and witnesses to his deeds and teaching. Then family and scribes put forth the misguided, mistaken accusation that his power to exorcise demons comes from Beelzebul. We can almost hear Jesus’ frustration in his words: How can Satan cast out Satan? Carefully, he explains. Satan is divided. In casting out unclean spirits – exorcism – Jesus defeats Satan bit by bit, undermining his power.

But Jesus draws the line at confusing Satan with the Holy Spirit. Being misguided, blind, mistaken can be forgiven. The people may be slow to comprehend that Jesus, the man who heals, is in fact the Son of God. Make no mistake, however – Jesus’ healing power comes from the Holy Spirit. To call the Holy Spirit an unclean spirit is a blasphemy too far. Jesus is called upon to speak with authority yet again.

So, in the reverse order of the chiasmic structure, Jesus reprimands the scribes, then his family re-enters the scene, and the passage resolves with Jesus addressing the crowd.

Does Jesus reject his family, his mother and his brothers and sisters, when he asks rhetorically, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Rather, when Jesus looks at the crowd and says, “Here are my mother and my brothers!” perhaps he is connecting his earthly self with his divine self. He has a human family, and he has a spiritual family. And that spiritual family includes us, part of the crowd, followers of Jesus and witnesses to his gospel.

An aside about Jesus’ brothers and sisters. The footnote for Mark 3:31 in the Harper Collins Study Bible makes an interesting point about this: “Reference to his brothers suggests Mark’s ignorance of the later doctrine of Mary’s perpetual virginity.” There is no birth narrative in Mark’s gospel, no annunciation to Mary, no star, nor angels, nor magi. Rather, Mark’s gospel opens with Jesus’ baptism by John, the descent of the Holy Spirit, and the temptation by Satan in the wilderness. Mark, the earliest of the four canonical gospels, is known for his emphasis on the earthly Jesus, pre-dating some of the more mystical and abstract doctrines of the faith.

Today’s complex and rich passage from Mark’s gospel reveals the tension between the human and divine aspects of Jesus. He has a family that doesn’t understand him, that doesn’t see him clearly, fully. A family, friends, a religious establishment, that do not see that he goes beyond humanity, and is the eternal Son of God, empowered by the Holy Spirit, healer of bodies, healer of souls, destroyer of Satan, the Messiah who overcomes death to usher in the kingdom of God.

The power of the Holy Spirit is a strong message. It is a Pentecost message. We are in the season which celebrates the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on God’s people, the moment when the Spirit empowers God’s people to be witnesses and spread the Good News. Jesus’ ministry is outward-looking, expansive, as he welcomes all who do the will of God into his family of spiritual brothers and sisters. The Holy Spirit is more than a force, a source of power. The Holy Spirit is a person of the Trinity, fully God, who abides in us, calls us, helps and empowers us in our struggle against sin and darkness.

Let us pray: Jesus, our brother, drive out the unclean spirits within us, and fill us with the Holy Spirit, that we may listen, and see, and act, to do God’s will, and so be brothers and sisters to one another and to you. Amen.

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