

***The Uncomfortable Gospel***  
***Mark 3:20-35***  
***June 6, 2021***

We are just beginning the long journey of the post-Pentecost season. But in Mark we have only begun. In these first few chapters Jesus has whirled through Galilee — baptized at the Jordan, the Spirit alights on him and God's blessing is pronounced on him; his opening words announce the presence of God's kingdom and call for a response to this good news; he walks by the sea and summons fisher folk to follow, and they fairly leap from their boats in obedient response; in a synagogue he teaches with an astounding authority, but a kind of secrecy enshrouds him which only the demonic seems to recognize; yet a secret power breathes from him that will not be contained, as witnessed by the numerous events of healing that mark his route. Through it all Jesus has avoided confrontation with the Jewish authorities by operating largely in the Galilean countryside.

Our reading today picks up the story after his choosing of the twelve disciples. Now he returns to Capernaum, to Peter and Andrew's house. In some sense this seems to have become his centre of operations. But even home is no longer a sanctuary. The crowd has gathered around and as many as can fit have squeezed into the house where he is teaching. They can't even eat in peace.

Mark sets one story, the questioning of the religious scribes, in-between the story of his family's concern. Back in Nazareth news about Jesus has them concerned. And it is so strong that they want to restrain him. Most of us would think that at least his family would get what Jesus is trying to do and would support him. But no, that is not the case. Mark tells us, as do the other Gospels, that they try to get him to come back with them to Nazareth. They are worried about him. Mark tells us that they think he has lost his mind. The translation from Greek simply means, *to stand outside of*, or in common parlance, Jesus is ***out of his mind***. In fact, John's gospel tells us that Jesus' **brothers didn't believe in him. (John 7: 5)**

Perhaps they are simply concerned that he is endangering himself by his opposition to the religious authorities. What he is teaching and doing (for example, healing on the Sabbath) is so provocative and so

opposed to Jewish religious life and teaching that the family are worried for his life. Maybe they fear all this attention has gone to his head. Right after the story of the family's concern Mark introduces the story of the arrival of the religious authorities from Jerusalem who challenge Jesus's ministry.

From the news of Jesus' teaching and healing that has circulated around Galilee and beyond, the religious authorities in Jerusalem have their radar on high alert. The Sanhedrin, the supreme religious and legal guardians of the faith, were alive to any kind of challenge to their Jewish Scriptures and the orthodox Mosaic faith.

Representatives arrive to confront Jesus. They accuse him of being in league with Beelzebul a Semitic deity worshipped by the Philistines. Basically, they claim Jesus is the servant of the devil and casts out demons by the power of the devil. In later Christian sources, it becomes another name for Satan. Jesus answers them by arguing that Satan wouldn't fight against himself. Neither him, nor a kingdom, nor a house, can be divided against itself or they will collapse.

Then comes the final word of warning to the religious leaders: **Truly I tell you, people will be forgiven for their sins and whatever blasphemies they utter; but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin”— for they had said, “He has an unclean spirit.”**

What is this unpardonable sin? Let me suggest that what Jesus is warning against is not a rejection of God or the Holy Spirit. His warning is in the imperfect tense suggesting a fixed position or a firm and final decision to reject the one God has sent. Jesus is warning them (and us) that to identify the power at work in Jesus with evil is unforgiveable. It is so because it rejects the very agent of God's healing and forgiveness.

It seems to me that to be persistently, unapologetically, and ruthlessly anti-God is coming really close to what Jesus warns of here in the unpardonable sin. To identify God's agent of grace and love with evil, to reject persistently through life that Jesus is Saviour and Lord, seems to me to come dangerously close to this unpardonable sin.

The good news, of course, is that all other sins, as Jesus tells them here in Mark, will be forgiven. God's grace is revolutionary. To think that God accepts you and me, not on our attempts at being good, not on our ability to keep the ten commandments, but solely on the basis of faith in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Ask anyone on the street corner today how one gets to heaven. What do you think is the common response to this question? A good percentage of responses will be on our role in that outcome: being good, doing our best, avoiding the worse sins, trying to keep the commandments! Heaven, in other words, is for those who are good.

The fact is that the Good News is not conventional wisdom. It is not compliant with the status quo of society's values and ambitions. Faith in Jesus takes us down a different road; it is the road less traveled! That's why it is uncomfortable choice to be a Christian. But it is also the most amazing, most wonderful, most grace-filled choice we will ever make. To follow Jesus, to accept him as our Lord, is to enter into a life of faith that enlarges our humanity and deepens our joy. It truly does fulfill our deepest need. But so many find this free gift of grace so difficult to accept. Our natural inclination is to work for it!

For the orthodox Jewish believer, the way to salvation was through keeping the Torah, observing the purity laws and temple worship. That's why the religious authorities from Jerusalem had such a hard time accepting Jesus' claims.! His Gospel becomes a huge stumbling block for us, as it did for these Scribes. For it demands such a radical change in our religious beliefs, our ethics, and our family values. To simply accept the gift of salvation by faith alone challenged them and us to the core. But, as Paul and all the New Testament would argue, faith is a gift that we simply have to accept. For most of us today, the families that shaped us didn't think this way. As Paul reminds us, anyone who takes this step is a new creation and the old way of thinking and being is gone. Conversion to the Gospel has the potential to discombobulate us.

In verses 31 and following Mark picks up the narrative of the family again. They can't get into the house for the crowds of people crushing inside and outside the door, so they send a message into the house. Mary says to tell him that his mother, his brothers and sisters are outside asking for him. They want to rescue him and take him home

where life can become normal again for him. They want to domesticate him.

Jesus' response seems cruel: **Who do you think are my mother and brothers?" Looking around, taking in everyone seated around him, he said, "Right here, right in front of you—my mother and my brothers. Obedience is thicker than blood. The person who obeys God's will is my brother and sister and mother (Mark 3:33ff, The Message).**

Wow! Now that is a Jesus that turns my view of things upside down. To think that my Christian family is more intimately related to me than my blood relatives is a strange idea. On the other hand, when I think of my own blood relatives I kind of get what Jesus is saying here. Think for a moment about your birth family! Compare the relationship you have with them and the one you have with your brothers and sisters in Christ. Is there a difference? What is it?

On a personal note, I remember how often my dear aunt Ruby would plead with me to return to my roots and forget all this *religious mumbo jumbo*. Just be myself was her plea. Don't be so religious! My mother was equally dumfounded at my choices in life; why would I abandon my accounting career potential for the much less lucrative and successful life in the church? She never really got my faith choice and perhaps I was not very good at explaining my faith to her. I wish now I had done a better job of relating my faith in Jesus to her.

Yes, this Gospel of Jesus is far more radical and demanding than is sometimes advertised. But the reality is that our relationship with God through Jesus and the Spirit has opened us up to life in a refreshing, deep way, unimagined before we became Christians. Faith has caused a huge shift in our priorities and attitudes. And because faith reaches into the heart of who we are, people made in God's image, it's not at all surprising that we have a much greater rapport with our fellow believers than with those in our biological family who remain distant from faith. Whether we like it or not, to be a Christian is to swim against the current and that can be uncomfortable and challenging.

**Amen**

