

**My Mother, Brothers, and Sisters...Are Watching the Bears-Packers Game
Mark 3:20-35**

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Fourth Presbyterian Church**

A more familiar translation of this passage says that a house divided against itself cannot stand. This week the local media has been full of stories of houses divided with respect to football allegiances. On Thursday, the Redeye profiled several Packers fans that live in Chicago among passionate and not always hospitable Bears fans. Earlier this week, church member and diehard Packers fan Jan Feldman sent me and some others a story about the plight of Packers fans in Chicago. Most interesting to me are the stories of those mixed marriages in which a Bears fan marries a Packers fan and together they must navigate complicated family dynamics when it comes to game time. Compared to sports rivalries, interfaith marriages are a breeze.

But this is probably not what Jesus had in mind when he talked about a house divided.

I wonder what Jesus would think of a controversy that brewed down in Alabama this past week. On Monday, during a Martin Luther King, Jr. celebration at a Baptist church in Montgomery, newly elected governor Robert Bentley had this to say:

...if we don't have the same daddy, we're not brothers and sisters. So anybody here today who has not accepted Jesus Christ as their savior, I'm telling you, you're not my brother and you're not my sister, and I want to be your brother. There may be some people here today who do not have living within them the Holy Spirit. But if you have been adopted in God's family like I have, and like you have if you're a Christian and if you're saved, and the Holy Spirit lives within you

just like the Holy Spirit lives within me, then you know what that makes? It makes you and me brothers. And it makes you and me brother and sister.

Predictably, non-Christians throughout the state of Alabama felt more than a little disenfranchised to hear this from their new governor, not long after he had been sworn into office. Many people complained, most notably the rabbi of the largest synagogue in Alabama. After a 75 minute meeting with this rabbi and other community leaders, the governor made a public apology for his divisive words.

So what would Jesus think about this? On the one hand, what the governor said doesn't sound all that different from what Mark says that Jesus said. But context makes a big difference. Jesus wasn't the democratically elected governor of a diverse state. And, given the deep divisions that exist in our society, I can't help wondering if Jesus would take such an opportunity to promote unity rather than division.

Yet the power struggles that cause such divisions, and lead to the heated words and actions that typify our public discourse, are not so far removed from the situation Jesus finds himself in as we pick up Mark's story this week. Having begun his ministry by proclaiming the arrival of God's kingdom and calling people to get on board by changing their hearts and minds and aligning themselves with God's vision for the world, Jesus begins to attract attention by healing the sick, casting out demons, performing miracles, and teaching his followers with startling authority. Already these activities have brought him into conflict with the religious leaders of the day. They see in Jesus a challenge to their authority with the people, a threat to the limited power they possess in society. And so they go on the offensive and try to subvert his mission by discrediting him in public.

But before the religious leaders have at him, we discover that his opposition also comes from much closer to home. In fact, the first to openly criticize him are literally from his home: his own family. Later in Mark's story we learn that the people of Jesus' hometown don't know what to make of him. They know him as the carpenter's son who grew up before their eyes. They know his parents. They know his brothers and sisters. How could this normal guy from their small village be doing these incredible things? Surely he was a fraud. Perhaps he was crazy.

In today's story, we find out that even his family is concerned. We can imagine that they are embarrassed, uncomfortable with the attention that their brother is receiving. They are no doubt confused and probably a little scared. After all, this man was the boy they grew up with. They remember what he was like as a child. They experienced him as a teenager and a young man. They know everything about him. Yet they weren't prepared for this. They could only conclude that he was out of his mind, and they tried to contain him.

Taking their cue from his family, the religious leaders accuse him of being possessed by a demon. In the ancient world, what we call mental illness was thought to be demonic possession. They conclude that he is only able to cast out demons because he is himself possessed by a demon, and they accuse him of this in public.

Not one to shy away from a challenge when there is something important at stake, Jesus easily cuts through the logic of their charge. Why would the demons be at war with themselves? Even they know that their cause is weakened by internal division. Satan is too wise to divide his own ranks.

At this point we must pause. All this talk of demons and Satan sounds odd to our ears. Sure, there are churches out there that talk about these figures with regularity and passion. But we're not that kind of church, are we? Here in this progressive, twenty-first century church we don't still believe that demons lurk in the shadows, do we? Do we really believe in the forces of Satan, waging war against the army of God?

Once again, context matters. The worldview of those who first heard this story was in fact filled with angels and demons, with a heaven that existed above the earth—a flat earth, we should note—and a hell that existed below. Things that we experience and explain with straightforward scientific reasoning they attributed to the forces of good and evil locked in a confrontation of cosmic significance. Behind the scenes of the material world existed a spiritual world that, unseen by the eyes of humanity, determined the course of history.

In the middle of the twentieth century, after the cultural revolution known as the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century and an explosion of critical Bible scholarship in the nineteenth century, German theologian Rudolf Bultmann concluded that it was time for us to be honest with ourselves and admit that we don't share the worldview of the Bible. Thanks to scientific and philosophical empiricism, we have very different explanations for why the world is the way it is and why things happen the way they do. Throughout his theological career, Bultmann committed himself to the project of demythologizing the New Testament, looking beyond ancient mythologies to the existential truths revealed in the Christian proclamation.

Butlmann's project was a noble one and the church would do well, decades later, to take up his challenge of reading the Bible with honesty and integrity. We do live in a different world, and we need not be afraid to read the Bible in full recognition of this.

However, whether we are talking about ancient mythologies, modern philosophy, or contemporary science, one thing remains the same from age to age: human beings seek to make sense of the world in which they live. We want to know why things happen the way they do, whether it is a natural phenomenon or the complicated behaviors of our fellow human beings.

Take, for example, public discourse after the recent shootings in Tucson. More than anything, people want to know *why* Jared Loughner did what he did. For some, this is simply the case of a mentally disturbed man doing something horrific and unthinkable. For others, this is a consequence of our emotionally charged and often over the top partisan bickering. For some, this happened because there aren't enough restrictions on guns; for others, the vulnerability exposed by this tragedy only demonstrates why more citizens ought to arm themselves. Like every human being that has ever existed, we want answers. *We need answers.*

In this respect, we aren't that different from those who thought that Jesus did what he did because he was possessed by a demon. Just as they demonized Jesus, we demonize each other. Just as they felt that he threatened their sense of power and control, we fight each other tooth and nail over power and control. For a brief moment we seemed sincere about those calls for unity and civility. But it didn't take us long to slip right back into familiar patterns of division. As a society, we are indeed a house divided.

In Mark's story, Jesus is actually not that concerned about division among demons. He talks about demons in a parabolic way to lead his listener to realize that the divisions he is most concerned about are actually in their own lives. Like those sectarian leaders that divided the allegiance of the Jewish people, we too are deeply divided. Our families, our city, our nation,

and our world all suffer from division. We find ourselves estranged from others, estranged from God, estranged even from our very selves. The world we live in cries out for healing, reconciliation, and unity. This is true now and it was true then.

This is why Jesus' next move is so puzzling. To be sure, he makes a plea for unity, but he does so at the expense of his own family. "Who are the true members of my family?" he asks. "It is not my mother, brothers, and sister. Rather, my true family are those who join me along this journey toward the kingdom of God."

Was Jesus simply rejecting his family because they rejected him? Was he so hurt by their failure to accept what God was doing through him that he turns his back on them, literally shutting them out of his inner circle?

I don't think that's what Jesus is up to. Instead, I think Jesus—as he does so often in Mark's story—redefines a common concept to mean something radically different. "Family" is no longer restricted to blood relationships, a startling claim for a culture that so highly valued kinship. Rather, "family" is determined by a relationship to God. In this way, those who answer Jesus' call to get on board with the kingdom of God are his true family.

In today's world, I think Jesus is telling us that we need to think about how we define ourselves and how we characterize others. Could it be that there is something greater than family names, nationalities, political parties, social class, theology, race, gender, or sexuality that defines who we are and how we relate to others? Could it be that there is something more important than our divisions that unites us together as one people? Could it be that as children of God, we all have something profound in common as sisters and brothers? Is it possible for us

to put our divisions aside and unite around the common good, what Jesus calls the will of God?

Can you imagine such a world?

In Mark's story, Jesus can. And as he continues along his journey, he invites us to do the same.

Amen.