

“The Power of Unity in the Ranks”
Sermon from Mark 3:20-27
Given Sunday, October 11, 2020
for the First Baptist Church of McMinnville
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Jesus went home, and again such a crowd gathered that he was unable even to eat a meal. When Jesus’ relatives heard of this, they went out to take charge of him, thinking that he had lost his mind. The religious scholars who had come down from Jerusalem said of Jesus, “He is possessed of Beelzebul,” and “He casts out demons through the ruler of demons.” Summoning them, Jesus spoke in parables: “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a realm is torn by civil strife, it cannot last. If a household is divided according to loyalties, it will not survive. Similarly, if Satan has suffered mutiny in the ranks and is torn by dissension, the Devil is finished and cannot endure. No attacker can enter a stronghold unless the defender is first put under restraint. Only then can the attacker plunder the stronghold.”

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When Ronald Reagan was running for a second term as president in 1984, his campaign strategy was to reassure all who would listen, “America is back, and walking tall.” Feel-good television commercials told viewers, “It’s morning again in America.” On the flip side of that sunniness was tough talk; Reagan touted this country’s dominance in the world and made no secret of the priority he gave to the defense budget. He called on the imagery of divine anointing for this place – “a shining city on a hill” – and for his position in it all. People all over the country – most people – ate it up.

But not all people. During the last two weeks of 1984 election season, people with a different vision began gathering daily outside the White House. They also chose particular imagery that could stick in the minds of the American people as they tried to bring to light what they saw happening around the country.

They erected a tent city in the park across the street from the White House to draw attention to the growing number of people without safe and secure shelter. They fasted, in protest of a governmental budget that prioritized “bombs over bread” and in consequence let people starve as this country’s weapons reserve grew bloated. Some came onto the grounds of the White House each day, a few even dripping blood on the portico, then kneeling and praying, evoking that image from the Hebrew scriptures about innocent blood crying out, saying that the victims of that administration’s policies – from Central America to southern Africa to South Korea to here at home – saying their blood was crying out from those whitewashed pillars.

It was a war of myths, fought not with bombs and guns but with language and image. It was a battle for people’s imaginations, for their empathy. And Reagan won handily – he won that mythic battle, and so he won the votes of every state except Minnesota and DC – and the protestors were largely thrown in jail. Which is not surprising – that’s often the way the story ends when the war being waged pits the empire against those who would challenge it. The challengers often end up jailed, or silenced, or dead.

But sometimes – sometimes they end up surviving at least long enough to talk about it. And when they do, we get stories like the Gospel of Mark.

The Gospel of Mark is not a historical document. It is not treatise on faith. The Gospel of Mark is the story of a war of myths that rages between Jesus and his opposition, the empire. Or maybe more precisely, the Gospel of Mark is the story of a war of myths that rages between the empire, and its opposition, Jesus and his followers.

What we have in the passage for today is a scene from this battle. In the beginning, Jesus is already in trouble. He's acting out – eating with anybody and everybody; telling people about a new world order; touching sick people and conversing with demons – and so everybody's talking about him, and that talk has made its way to his family, and they're worried about him. And they're worried about him because they know what happens to people that everybody's talking about. They know what happens to people who don't abide by the rules and expectations that govern everyday life, *especially* when that not abiding appears to be deliberate.

So they try to make it seem like *it's not deliberate, of course it's not; he's confused, he's... well, he's delusional*. The word in the Greek means, “he is outside of himself.” They come to try to put a protective arm around him, to steer him back towards home, like, “Come on, now Jesus, that's enough for today; nothing to see here, folks; just let us take him home.”

But the religious authorities will have none of that. He's not delusional, they say; he's demonic. He's been sent by the prince of demons, and any power we see from him is the power of demons.

This is the battle being fought with image and language. This is good versus evil, writ small, using the imagery and the language of Mark's world. Commentator Ched Myers writes, "To put it in terms of the political war of myths, when the ruling class feels its hegemony threatened, it tries to neutralize challengers by identifying them with the mythic cultural arch-demon."

The religious authorities are – well, they're good; they're God's representatives; that's who they've always believed themselves to be. So their logic is, if Jesus opposes them, he must come in opposition to God. He must be an embodiment of evil. He must come in the name of Beelzebul, the mythic prince of the demons, or, as his name is sometimes translated, the Lord of the... Flies.

These are the terms used in Mark's context, and they're different from ours. Our mythic world, our political context, is different. But the tactics are not different. Do you remember what it meant, a couple of decades ago, to call someone a communist? Do you remember how much was being said with that accusation? Or today, how socialism is portrayed in some circles as an instrument of evil?

That's what's happening here between Jesus and the authorities. They know they've got the attention of the crowd, so they're looking for the word that will most clearly convey "enemy" to anyone within earshot. They're trying to make people afraid of Jesus. His family is trying to convince people to ignore him, they're saying he's harmless; the religious authorities are trying to make people fear him, they're saying he's dangerous.

I mean, try to imagine yourself back into that world. Try to imagine that you don't know Jesus, that you didn't grow up singing songs about how much he loves you or moving cut-out figures around on a felt board to tell the stories of his life.

Or, if that's too hard, try to imagine being up close and personal with someone the empire is telling you to fear today: a protestor with her first in the air and her voice piercingly loud, who won't stop shouting about the ways this country has done wrong by her and her ancestors. Or a man who doesn't speak English, and doesn't carry any papers, and doesn't have a dollar to his name, who just pitches his tent in the park each night until he's kicked out, forced to move on. Or an upstart politician who comes with a plan for reparations and a demand of fewer weapons on the streets.

I mean, the religious authorities are right. Jesus is dangerous. But not in the way they're saying. And they know it.

He's dangerous to them. He's a threat to their power, and to the imperial power their authority upholds. He's gaining a crowd, which means, conversely, they're losing one. He's challenging their interpretations of what matters most – the law or the Spirit – and if he convinces people it's the spirit, and not the law, well, it's really hard to govern the Spirit.

But most of all, he's a threat to their lack of imagination.

A friend of mine is taking parenting classes. She said at a recent one, the teacher shared a mantra that's been helpful to her – that now is helpful to me, and maybe will be to you, too. The teacher told her,

and all the parents in the class, “Get curious, not furious.” My friend wrote it down on a piece of scrap paper, stuck it to her fridge with a magnet. *Get curious, not furious.* When you suspect your children are up to something – or when you know they are – even when you know they’ve done something terrible – don’t start off by screaming at them that they’ve done something terrible. Start off by asking questions. There is always more to the story than what we can see. And if we can be curious – about that story, about our kids, about each other, about those we might call enemies – if we can be curious first, we might not actually end up furious. Or, if we do end up furious, we can trust it will be for good reason.

Commentator David Lose says it’s not that the religious authorities are *wrong* in their relating to God, in their interpretation of the holy. Surely God works, speaks, moves through them. They are in the business of helping people navigate their religious lives. That’s what they do: they interpret the stories, they pass on the laws. They give people the tools to follow them. But they have their way, and they just cannot imagine another. They cannot fathom that what Jesus is doing might also be of God, from God. They cannot let themselves be curious about him; they cannot let themselves wonder about what he might do next or how he could expand their understanding of the divine. They insist on being offended, because he does not play the game their way. They are first – and, consequently only – furious.

And because they cannot be open, because they cannot imagine the possibility of God working any way except the ways they already know and anticipate, Jesus tells them that what they’re doing can’t last. It will not stand. Their demonization of him is a sign of their fear, not their faith; it signals their weakness, not their strength.

I mean, he basically tells them, “What you’re saying doesn’t make any sense. If Satan were fighting Satan, pretty soon there wouldn’t be any Satan left.” And then he tells them his ministry will be like breaking and entering: he will bind the strong man, he will bind the powers that keep people afraid and ashamed, and he will liberate all that are held captive in that way. Set them free.

It makes me wonder: what if the religious authorities are also held captive by their own interpretations? What if their fear and their weakness is rooted in their lack of imagination about what else might be possible, how else God might be working? What if this new way Jesus is bringing – healing on the Sabbath, extending the welcome at the table, living out a kingdom ethic – what if that might be freeing to them, too? What if the non-violent love Jesus comes to proclaim and eventually give his life for is not just a tool to achieve an end, not just a new kind of weapon in this battle, but a promise, and a foundation for a new way of being?

We’re not there yet. The thing about these mythic wars is they don’t seem to end. There is still a battle raging for our imagination, and our empathy; it’s just been repackaged, rebranded, for today. But only slightly, really. On political signs around town last month, someone took a black sharpie to pictures of candidates and added devil horns to the Republican faces. On the front door of this church last month, someone taped a letter declaring a holy war against us because we fly flags to let queer people know they are safe and celebrated here.

We are all caught in this game, and its consequences are real. And maybe we won't all agree on the best tactics moving forward. Maybe we all have different weapons to fight with, different tools to build with.

But if we could all commit to curiosity, that would be a start. If we could unify around the acknowledgement that we do not know all that there is to know, and we cannot imagine all that others have to teach us, we could maybe begin again. We could put an end to our endless mythic wars if only we begin to get curious about each other's real lives. There is so much at stake. Let's try it.