

"Something to Chew On"

Mark 3:20-35

A Sermon for the People of St. Lucas United Church of Christ

Delivered on June 9&10, 2018 by Kelly Archer, Pastoral Assistant

Thank you for that scripture reading Pastor Keith. Gulp. Lucky for all of us this isn't the first I'm hearing of today's scripture assignment, however, I pretty much had the same reaction to it when I first realized that this was the text I would have to preach on this morning: Gulp. I remember reading the passage and then waling straight into Pastor Eric's office to talk about alternative options. You know, options like not following the lectionary at all, and rather I could pick a story, say the one about Fishes and Loaves, instead. Or the option about splitting the difference, and following this week's lectionary assignment from the Old Testament instead. That story happens to be the one about Eve and the snake, and one I think I have something to say about. My basis for seeking other options, as I told Pastor Eric, was that this passage just didn't seem like something the Intern should really be taking on. It felt out of my pay grade, if you will. I'd be doing all of us a favor, to take a pass. That's when Pastor Eric, very pastorally reminded me, that I am no longer the intern around here. Indeed, School is out for summer.

So, my tune changed. And I remembered, deeply, that we can do hard things! My professors at Eden Seminary certainly haven't taught me to shy away from challenges. And St. Lucas, as my learning lab congregation, has certainly has taught me to be brave. And so, I accepted this assignment, and tried as I could to find joy in all things.

I forced myself remembered why I love the lectionary in the first place. This Revised Common Lectionary as it is formally known, is a three-year cycle or rotation of Bible passages that allow faith communities to essentially cover the Bible in three-year increments. Each week includes an Old Testament reading, a psalm, a gospel reading and a passage from the epistles, Paul's letters. Of course there is a lot to say about a lectionary in the first place, especially as one considers what is and is not included, and who exactly got to make that call. However, there is also a lot to be said about the unity it fosters as well. Have you ever had a conversation with a friend who attends another church and realize your congregations both read the same scripture on Sunday, your pastors preached on the same story? That's because of the lectionary. Most main line protestant denominations follow this lectionary calendar. In the UCC our polity allows us choice in this matter, our pastors can craft worship as they see fit, however, by following this lectionary we are joining into a stream of worship with other Christians throughout time and place. It allows holds pastors accountable, to not just cherry pick stories or avoid them, as the

case might be. This summer the ministerial team here at St Lucas decided to follow the lectionary as it takes us thru the Gospel of Mark this summer, allowing us to dig deeper into the very first gospel written, the very first narrative of Jesus' ministry.

And so here we are, at Mark 3 versus 20-35. In digging deeper you will have the chance to discover the nuances of St. Mark as an author, and one rather famous one, is the Markan Sandwich. That is, that Mark likes to arrange his narrative with three layers of actions, like the bread, meat, and bread of a sandwich. Since Mark created this sandwich for us layer by layer, I thought we'd examine it layer by layer. Mark providing the ancient substance, the meat and bread, and I'll add some reflections for contemporary flavors.

In the first layer, we once again find a crowd forming around Jesus. In fact we are told the crowd was such that "they couldn't even eat". Jesus' family came out of their house when they heard that Jesus was out of his mind, and they restrained him. Then the scribes, the religious and legal authorities, arrive and offer their take on the situation, which is surly Jesus must be possessed by evilness – working for Beelzebub and Satan. This dramatic scene of a crowd calling Jesus crazy, the authorities calling Jesus demonic, and his mother and brothers restraining him, is the bottom bread of our Markan Sandwich today.

A dramatic scene indeed, one worthy of the term drama! I don't know about you but when I think about Jesus, held back, and bombarded by haters, those that doubt him and condemn him, I am struck by the reality of this moment. The very real, reality. Even a reality show moment. You see when God sent God's very own son to the world to teach us how to live, God didn't spare Jesus any of that Earthly part. Nope. God sent Jesus to us as a real person, on this side of the Fall, to live his lifespan in our broken world. After all, he was born homeless, and shortly became a refugee fleeing for his very young life, and then of course, we all know about the end of his life – being betrayed by a closest friend, not given a fair trial, and ultimately executed by the State. Though there were moments when he walked on water, the majority of his life was spent in the muck, the grit, the dirt. He crossed boundaries speaking to and even eating with those that were deemed ceremonially unclean. People who were restricted from living inside the camp, people who were barred from entering the temple, these were Jesus' people. And it was real. So here we see Jesus being bullied, getting picked on, and making his own mother, the VIRGIN MARY, shake her head. Though it is tempting to think of Jesus as nice and mild, lest we forget our savior has been arrested! Nope. Jesus hasn't been meek or mild since he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying as a babe manger. As a

man, Jesus was outspoken and disruptive. And this wasn't exactly popular, as we can see in the text.

Being reminded of Jesus' deep humanity is important, I think. After all, so are we. The last time I spoke from this pulpit, we explored what it meant to be imperfect. Now I'm not saying Jesus' actions are imperfect in this story, but I am saying, it's not exactly a perfect day. Think about it, your neighbors think you're crazy, your mom and brothers do too, and the authorities think you're possessed! That's no day at the Galilean beach! And yet, so often, we think we have to be perfect for Jesus, even perfect for church. But I suggest, as this story suggests, that in fact we are really called to be real to be authentic. To turn to Jesus and our church on days when our lives are as drama filled as this ancient day Mark describes. Not to let "a lot going on" distance us from God, but to draw nearer. Whether we are struggling with addiction, or deception, or temptation or thoughts of suicide. Jesus can help us with our earthly concerns, because he's had some too. He can intercede in even the sketchiest situation. Jesus is the real deal. So, don't just open up to him in polite thankfulness, tell him what's really going on, let him see the dust bunnies of your soul.

The second layer of this sandwich, is defiantly the meat. After all, it's the teachings of Jesus. And it's juicy! Scholars speculate that the second stories in Mark's triplicates, is a position of emphasis. This reminds me of my son's karate dojo. There, sensei always uses a similar approach, offering a complement first (Great energy), then the critique (Tighten your fist), followed by another compliment (Looking sharp!). It doesn't just offset the sting of the criticism, it allows the student to actually hear it, because otherwise if you lead with judgement, you might get tuned out. Perhaps Mark wants us to actually hear Jesus, now, as he responds to the chaos that surrounds him in this moment. It becomes a teaching moment for Jesus. He meets the people where they are at – using their current behavior as the lesson topic for the day: one of unity and one of being open minded to the work of the Holy Spirit.

Two thousand years removed from these stories, we have come to recall Jesus as our Lord. As our Savior. As our Redeemer. But while he was here, he was very much a teacher. Rabboni is the name Mary Magdalene cries out when she meets up with Jesus after the cross, and Rabboni means teacher. Every teacher has their style, and for Jesus, he teaches in parables – in metaphors and in questions. He purposes: How could Satan drive out Satan? That's Jesus logic for you! Proving he couldn't be in cahoots with Beelzebub because he had been busy casting out demons all over town. So much so, that this crowd was well aware of his exorcism ministry. He also gives us this image of a house divided, which of course, was

famously quoted by Abraham Lincoln in a speech he gave as a US Senate candidate from Illinois. It's a powerful metaphor. A house divided cannot stand. A Kingdom divided cannot stand. And for Lincoln, of course, it was a nation divided that could not stand. It's a rally cry for unity. And not just because gee whiz it would be nice if we could live in unity, but because it's vital, it's crucial, it's a priority – because divide we crumble.

Jesus spoke of unity quite a bit. And so unity is a big part of our Christian faith tradition, even if that isn't always evident in our Christian history. Think about baptism, it is our universal initiation rite into this crazy wonderful life of discipleship. No matter if that happened when we were babies or adults, if we were sprinkled or dunked, we enter into this community of believers from all nations. United in our membership in Christ's church and in our path following Christ's footprints. Communion is about unity too. For as the grain scattered in the field becomes one in the loaf, we too, scattered and diverse become one body when we share this meal together. Indeed, practicing our faith, even gathering for worship on this Sabbath morning, unites us with our siblings in faith that span through time and place. It's even the unity of following the lectionary that brings us (and so many others) this passage this morning.

A call for unity is good news, certainly, so I'm still hanging with St. Mark here. But this next part the part about the eternal sin, is I'm afraid where I start to have those uncomfortable feelings. You see, to me, unforgivable sin, reads like an oxymoron. That is, it just doesn't make sense. I've stood in this very pulpit and preached on God's overflowing forgiveness and mercy. That with God we have forever tries. That there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. *Was I wrong?* That God sent God's only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Period. Not Asterisk. For I do not recall reading about any fine print carved into the bottom of that wooden cross. *Am I wrong?*

When I assured you earlier that we can do hard things, I didn't explain how exactly we can do that. And that is together. That's how any of us, get through anything. Together. Friends, isn't it wonderful, that in all of God's intricate designing, that he gave us all of us, each other, to keep us company and to help us when it comes to those hard things. I reached out to my dear friend Rev. Dr. Marilyn Stavenger, a faculty emeritus member at Eden Seminary, and a member of the congregation at my home church, Peace UCC. I gave her the scripture passage ahead of time and asked her to help me find its good news, after all, it is from the gospel! She agreed and as I jotted down the plans to meet up at my favorite coffee shop by campus, I caught myself smiling. What do you know? Already this passage was proving to be just a little life giving after all.

It also felt life giving that day when I noticed an eavesdropper! What fun they must have had with us, maybe grandmother and granddaughter types, nice ladies, going on and on about Beelzebub and Satan as we sipped our iced lattes!

Being at the feet of my teacher, filled my heart for gratitude for all teachers, and their ability to make a scary topic, literally, approachable. Gratitude for teachers of course, includes Jesus. And of course, that includes Jesus. Mary's Rabboni, Our Rabboni.

And in this passage, Jesus is sure is teaching! He's surrounded by doubters and critics and he isn't flinching. He keeps teaching – he keeps trying to teach the crowd about a new way. He cares about those students enough to keep teaching, even other those goofballs in the back of the class seem like they'll never learn. Jesus is in flow mode, rattling off parable after parable, teaching in vivid imagery and those open ended questions.

Jesus teaches in parable and metaphor, and yet here I was clinging to something literally. Jesus teaches in contexts, and yet here I was isolating one word, unforgivable, and giving it so much power. Not holding in context, in unity, with the other teachings of Jesus and God.

So I shifted, and began to be open minded to the metaphor and imagery behind this lesson. Imagine that? Roundabout wisdom, from a teacher who speaks in metaphor and parables. Blaspheme against the Holy Spirit, is this scenario, is depicted in the crowds failure to recognize the works of Jesus as holy. As the act of God. Dismissing him as crazy or demonic, fails to witness the work of the Holy Spirit right there in front of them. Right there in the man currently being restrained by his own blood. Oh what they were missing! And the unforgivable part, that's more of an ancient Catch 22. In that if we are turning our back on the works of God, we are also turning our backs on our own forgiveness, for it is in the works of God that we are forgiven. God's works are the vehicle, the mechanism of forgiveness. This means, folks, that by simply reorienting ourselves to the will of God, we are as always, forgiven.

Whew! This interpretation I offer may seem like a relief, especially if you were squirming in your pew during the reading. But, this interpretation challenges us, like any good lesson does. How are we like the crowd? And when are we like the crowd? In other words, how and when do we denounce something or someone as evil, as neglect to see the holy spirit at work in their lives. Maybe there is someone in our own family, or someone we have authority over at work, who we think is crazy! And evil! Can we open our minds to the possibility that there maybe

something were missing? Something we do not understand. Can we answer Jesus' cry for unity, none the less?

It's the part of the passage where the crowd tells Jesus that his mother and brothers are looking for him and he responds, who are my brothers and mother? Anyone who does God's will is my mother and brother and sister. Mark's Jesus speaks of family and households a lot, as we'll see this summer. In many ways Jesus disrupts these systems too, as they existed in ancient times. But where one could read this as destruction of the family, sort of throwing shade on Mary, I see it as so much more expansive. After all, Jesus is saying ANYONE, ANYONE, Any-one who does God's will is my family. And he's saying this at a time when there were a lot of anyones that lived marginalized lives, and yet for Jesus, they were family too. Talk about unity. Do you feel that way too? Do you feel a siblingship with other believers? What about with Christians whose views differ dramatically with yours? Unity isn't conformity, after all. Unity, like family, is about a greater good, some common ground, and of course, love.

Those of us with families can attest that it can take a whole lot more than a shaking head, to tear us apart. Mary and Jesus loved each other – Mary loved Jesus so much so that she stood at the foot of the cross in what must have been complete agony for her. And Jesus loved Mary so much that he used some of his very last breath on the cross to ask his disciple John to take care of her as his own mother. And as touching as those moments on Calvary hill are, aren't they even more touching knowing that their relationship wasn't always easy? Isn't that even more beautiful? Again, because it is so real.

And there you have it: 3 layers from Mark and three reflections from me. We did it. Together. Thank you, St. Lucas for listening to me. This scripture wasn't really worth the anxiety. In fact, it's really grown on me. It's a new go-to for me, for lessons on unity and the expansiveness of family, for sure. But the piece that's was once under my skin, now lives in my heart as a charge really, a benediction: How am I turning my back on the work of the Holy Spirit? And do I realize that when I do that, I am separated from God. Those are worthy questions brought forth by this text, a gift from the lectionary, and I offer them to you to chew on, and perhaps to get stuck in your teeth so that they stay with you just a bit longer. How are you turning your back on the holy spirit? What are you calling insane or evil? Are you certain you aren't missing something there? Are you certain there isn't a way to find unity with them or it instead?

Some bakers insinuated that gay marriage was evil and against God when they refused to bake a cake for the Charlie Craig and Dave Mullins wedding. Could they be mistaken? They certainly don't think so, and they claim support from the religious authorities and now, because of the action of the Supreme Court, the legal authorities, just like that crowd found legal and religious support from the scribes. Yet is it possible that the Holy Spirit is at work in the hearts of those who profess their love and seek to enter a covenant of marriage? The grooms that were created by God in God's image? I am purposely asking all of this in question form, just like Jesus, not to issue you an answer but to invite you to ponder. It can be confusing, especially when some call something holy and others call something evil. When we are discerning whether or not something is holy or evil, right or wrong, of God or of Satan we can always be on the look-out for signs. After all you can tell a tree by its fruit, and the fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Siblings, I know that was a polarizing example, and therefor I do not introduce it lightly. But can we be real for a minute? We simply can't have a lesson on unity utilizing an example like puppies are cute or cancer is awful. These aren't divisive issues, they aren't the threats that may collapse our kingdoms or households. No, in order to learn about unity, this principle Jesus was so keen on teaching to us, we must be willing to do the hard thing. Together.

We have been warned what happens when we remain divided. And we have been equipped with one another as Family, Jesus family even, when we do the will of God. Unity and family, thanks be to God, well what do you know? That sounds like good news! So I'm going to stop right there.