

Sunday June 09, 2024

3rd after Pentecost

Mark 3:20-35

“Why Can We Not see the Good?”

The late Charles Shultz, creator of the famous comic strip *Peanuts*, was a very devout Christian man and this was reflected in his comic strip. He was also simply amazing at saying the most profound things in such a simple way. One of his most famous strips has Lucy philosophizing, and Charlie Brown listening. “Charlie Brown,” Lucy begins, “life is a lot like a deck chair. Some place it to see where they’ve been. And some so they can see where they are at present.” Charlie sighs, “I can’t even get mine unfolded.” (Michael Green, Illustrations for Biblical Preaching.)

Pretty insightful, isn’t it? You can really feel the frustration in Charlie Brown’s assessment of his life. As his friends, and even his own sister Sally was apt to say, “You’re so wishy washy, Charlie Brown.” Charlie is so anxious about life that he does not even see what is going on right in front of him. This little comic strip begs the question, about how my own deck chair is situated. How wishy-washy am I? Can I see the reality of what is right in front of me?

Our gospel lesson today is all about perception or perspective. Mark is the only one that records this incident, probably, as William Lane suggests, because it made the early church so uncomfortable. I mean the idea that Jesus’ own family would think he was insane. Early on in Jesus’ ministry, through Mark’s Gospel, we are shown how three significant groups of people see and understand Jesus. There are, of course, the crowds, and the disciples, who see in Jesus something very special, messianic even. They flock to him in droves.

But I want us to focus on the two groups who hold a negative opinion of Jesus. The second group, as I mentioned, are his family who begin to think that Jesus has lost his mind, or his grip on reality. Then the third group is an official delegation from the religious court in Jerusalem, who has arrived on the scene to investigate what Jesus is all about. In every case, how any single person understands Jesus, and what they believe about Jesus, is determined as Charles Shultz suggests, by which direction their deck chair is facing.

The story takes place in the region of Galilee, very close to where Jesus grew up, likely in the home of Simon and Andrew, the two fishermen who became Jesus’ disciples. The fame of Jesus, even this early on in his ministry, was growing rapidly, and the crowds seeking his attention were becoming overwhelming. The demands on Jesus for healing, and teaching, were endless, so much so, that Mark says He didn’t even have time to eat.

This hectic life of ministry, without proper rest and meals, seems to have been a common occurrence for Jesus, as we see it again in Mark 6:31. It is also one of the reasons behind passages where we read of Jesus needing to go off by himself to pray, and why he could sleep in the boat in the middle of a vicious storm. The lack of rest and food is one sign of the growing fervency of Jesus’ mission.

As we know from other people of God in the bible, a zeal for God was often mistaken for madness. (Zech. 13:3-6) It is quite conceivable that his family has heard about his lack of eating, and rest, and in their worry for him, sought to take him away from the crowds.

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Perhaps they feared he had become carried away by his own fame. When, later, they actually come to the house where Jesus is teaching and use their family connection to try and draw him out, the lack of faith and understanding of Jesus' own family is revealed.

From their perspective, on their deck chair, Jesus' family sees what is taking place, not as evidence of God's work of salvation, but of Jesus being mentally unstable. They wrongly assume, that the reason Jesus is fervent in his mission, is because he has lost his grip on reality. They may be concerned for Jesus, but they show little understanding of who Jesus really is, and why he has come.

If there is any positive view about what his family is doing, it is that they likely were genuinely concerned for him. Although in John 7:3-10 we read that his brothers scoffed at him and doubted his true nature. The other group that we meet in this passage, who was negative towards Jesus, had little, if anything, positive to say. Last week it was the Pharisees. Today it is clear that this group of scribes, or experts in religious law, had been sent as a team of investigators.

The Jewish Court, called the Sanhedrin, had also heard about Jesus, and what he was doing, and in accordance with the law, came to see if he was a true prophet, or a false teacher. Now, if you think these investigators came with an open mind, you would be wrong. Even before they left Jerusalem, they already had an opinion about how Jesus was able to do these amazing miracles.

To the Sanhedrin, Jesus was a major irritant. He was an itch they couldn't scratch. The Sanhedrin believed they had a nicely ordered situation for themselves, and nothing that upset that would be tolerated. But just saying they disagreed with Jesus, or he irritated them, was not enough. The miracles, observed by many, had to be explained. They had to come up with an explanation for Jesus' miracles that was consistent with their theology; a way to dismiss him for religious reasons.

So, they came to Galilee armed with a predetermined opinion. They had two opinions. Thinking about the miracles that Jesus performed, the religious experts first concluded that Jesus is possessed by a demon. Then they refine their conclusion further, by intimating that Jesus was in collusion, or partnership with the devil.

I should point out to you, that the common perception of Jewish scholars in the first century, after Jesus was crucified, was that he was a sorcerer, empowered by the devil. In the Sanhedrin's own documents, we read, "Yeshu of Nazareth was hanged on the day of preparation because he practiced sorcery and led people astray." (43A Baraita) The early church father, Justin Martyr, wrote about the Jews, "and they dared to say he was a magician and seducer of the people." (Dialogue with Typho)

The charge of being a sorcerer, and in league with the devil, was a common opinion held by many in Jesus' day. What is odd about all this is how ludicrous the claim is, especially from men who are supposed to know the scriptures? Any scholar, contemporary with Jesus, of the Law of Moses, worth his salt, would know how powerful Satan is. Just look around at the human misery caused by Satan's enslavement of mankind.

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It is illogical to think that Satan would possess someone to defeat himself. Every exorcism, every healing, is a defeat for Satan. It is an encroachment on his territory. Why would Satan want that? Then to say that Jesus is in partnership with Satan is even more illogical. To illustrate this point, Jesus reminds them that the first thing you do when you rob the house (invade someone's territory) of a physically strong man, you must first tie him up, or you will never succeed in robbing him. Only a robber, who is stronger, can tie the strong man up.

The miracles, Jesus is doing, are signs that Jesus has tied Satan up, and is now plundering, stealing his possessions, namely lost souls. Exorcisms, particularly, are signs of God's forceful attack on Satan's power. Can you see the illogic of the scribe's opinion? However, besides being illogical, their opinion is extremely dangerous, because it borders on blasphemy.

Blasphemy, by definition, is an expression of defiant hostility towards God. The scribes were in danger of doing just that. Jesus is clear that the work he does, including the miracles, is empowered by the Holy Spirit. By attributing the work of the Holy Spirit to demonic forces, the scribes are denying the power and greatness of the Holy Spirit. Eugene Petersen translates this as they were "sawing off the branch they were sitting on."

It is blasphemous; to attribute the good and merciful things that God does to other causes, especially demonic ones. In verses 28-29 Jesus says, "I assure you that any sin can be forgiven, including blasphemy; but anyone who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. It is an eternal sin." Jesus is giving a dire warning to the scribes that they are placing their souls in grave danger.

Now I should pause here for a moment and address a great anxiety that has permeated the Christian community over its history. Many good, faithful Christians, fear that at some point they have blasphemed the Holy Spirit. They fear that they have done or said something that has condemned their eternal souls. Have you ever heard this, or experienced this anxiety yourself? Well, let's put it in perspective, shall we?

Canfield (Commentary on Mark) writes this very helpful observation regarding this unforgivable sin. "It is a matter of great importance pastorally that we can say with absolute confidence to anyone overwhelmed by the fear that he has committed this sin, that the fact that he is so troubled is itself proof that he has not committed it." In other words, those who commit the unforgivable sin, don't care, because they deny God and do not fear him.

The scribes, however, should know better. They should know, from their study of scripture, the goodness and mercy of God; and yet they are trapped in their own sense of legalism. It is clear from my reading of scripture, and from my experience, that the quickest way to undermine, hinder, or distract people from the saving work of Christ is to adopt a legalistic stance in life. Legalism means living and judging others based on manmade rules to the exclusion of seeing the mercy of God at work.

The harshest words, Jesus is ever recorded speaking in the gospels, is not directed at known sinners, like tax collectors or prostitutes, but to religious authorities.

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In other words, people who should know better. Jesus is angry at them for denying the grace and mercy of God to sick people in need of the Great Physician. Self-appointed arbiters of God's mercy, who are like the older brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Max Lucado says of legalism, "Legalism has no pity on people. Legalism makes my opinion your burden, makes my opinion your boundary, and makes my opinion your obligation." (Up Words, May 1993) Does this not sound like the experience Jesus has with the scribes. Legalism can also lead us to blasphemy. By this, I mean, that we get so trapped in rules that we fail to see the good thing God is doing, and attribute it to satanic forces or manmade innovation.

Donald Barnhouse tells a funny story from way back in 1928. *Around 1928, I led a bible conference at Montrose, Pennsylvania, for about two hundred young people and a few older people. One day two older ladies complained that some of the young girls were not wearing stockings. These ladies wanted me to rebuke them. Looking them straight in the eye, I said, "The Virgin Mary never wore stockings." They gasped and said, 'She didn't?'"*

I answered, "In Mary's time, stockings were unknown. So far as we know, they were first worn by prostitutes in Italy in the fifteenth century, when the renaissance began. Later, a lady of nobility scandalized the people in the upper classes by wearing stockings at a court ball. Before long everyone in the upper classes was wearing stockings, and by Queen Victoria's time stockings had become the badge of the prude."

These ladies, who were holdovers from the Victorian epoch, had no more to say. I did not rebuke the girls for not wearing stockings. A year or two afterward, most girls in the United States were going without stockings in summer and nobody thought anything about it. (Let Me Illustrate)

Barnhouse's point is clear; these ladies were more worried about some antiquated Victorian rule, than excited by the fact that two hundred young people had come to worship and learn about God. They could not see the good thing, because their hearts were closed to it. The same could be said for Jesus' family, and certainly about the scribes. What concerns me most today, however, is what we see from our deck chairs.

Jesus says that those who do God's will are his family, not those who go about making sure all the Ts are crossed, and the Is dotted. We must be very careful to not judge the value of any enterprise for God, based on the level of fervency of those involved. We must be extremely cautious in attributing ministry or mission for God to other sources. That doesn't mean we cannot have discernment; we just need to be cautious.

Just because some ministry initiative is new to us, and different from what we personally have experienced, does not mean it is wrong or satanic. The Holy Spirit is very creative, and it moves where it wills. We need to be quicker to praise, for what God is doing, and much slower to skepticism. There is also one other lesson that I take from this passage that I wish to raise.

You will remember that Jesus was so involved in his mission that he was neglecting to eat and rest.

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Jesus, being the Son of God, may have had some more latitude when it came to skipping meals and naps, but I am sure the same doesn't hold for us. All of us need self-care. This is especially true for those who give of themselves to mission of God's Kingdom, which should be all of us.

I mentioned earlier that if Jesus' family got anything right in this passage, it was that they were concerned about him. We too, should be concerned for each other, in helping each other to serve at our highest levels. We need to give, even those most critical to our Christian work, time to rest and renew. We need to honour our brothers and sisters, who share with us that they have reached their limit and need to step away.

I guess a big part of our sitting on the deck chair is just sitting and resting. As the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Commission like to say, "Know your limit and stay within it." Even failing to care for ourselves can border of blasphemy. In thinking we are indispensable to the Kingdom of God; we deny the power and sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. In refusing to rest and renew, we are refusing God's loving care.

It is blasphemous to think we know better, even about ourselves than God does. So, there you have it, a passage where everyone seems to be worrying about Jesus. Worrying that he may be out of his mind, or worrying that he is in league with the devil, worrying that he is upsetting the apple cart, and yet from our deck chair what do you see Jesus concerning himself with?

Certainly not personal comforts, as he even isn't eating. He certainly isn't concerned about what his family thinks or the religious authorities. What's his chief concern? Mark records in verse 32, "There was a crowd around him". Jesus' first concern is people. Jesus' first concern is you and me. Do you see this from your deck chair or perspective? If not, then maybe it's time to for us to rearrange our chairs.