Sermon on Proper 10 2021
(Mark 3:20-35 and 1 Samuel 8)

We fall back into Mark’s Gospel, the first one ever written as far as we know, and the one assigned to this lectionary year. During different special times like Lent and Easter the lectionary tends to use the Gospel of John.

And we rejoin Mark’s story at a troubled moment that resonates with our own moment in Canadian society.

What is at stake in Mark’s account and in our own lives is nothing less than the definition of family, God’s and our own, water and blood as it were, and the role each plays, must play! for a healthy society and the massive difference all of this makes to our partnership with God’s Mission of Loving Justice for all.

Immediately prior to today’s reading Jesus has appointed 12 disciples, a clear sign that Israel with its original 12 tribes, long since ground into oblivion by successive Iron age superpowers, is now being reconstituted from ordinary Israelites.

Now, however, not drawn from a single family, Jacob’s 12 sons, but from a cross section of Israelite society, from a variety of political persuasions and with different economic realities.

It appears to be this move that has sparked Jesus’ own family to think he’s off his rocker and they go out to restrain him.

In our culture we would say they seek to commit him to the psych ward. And when the religious leaders, in this case the scribes, sense an opening, sense that even “his own” aren’t circling the wagons to protect him, they rip at the wound, piling on, accusing him of having not only a demon but the prince of demons, Beelzebub, Lord of the Flies.

In Jesus’ time, insanity was thought to be caused by demons and the riddance of such was a big part of Jesus’ own ministry. Thus the contrivance of needing to name Jesus’ allegiance to Beelzebul, the prince of demons.

Because I have different fish to fry in this homily, all I’ll say about Jesus’ response regarding the “sin against the Holy Spirit” and the controversy that surrounds it, is that when we start calling what is clearly a good evil; when we start calling the freeing of people from an evil bond, a chief evil, then we’re hooped; we can’t recognize good from bad and indeed are deliberately confusing the two.

This is unforgiveable not in the sense that God can’t forgive it or stubbornly won’t, but that those who do so have left themselves no exit for repentance as they tunnel further into lies and deception.

I think it’s important to acknowledge that some beliefs are so pernicious and destructive that they rip at the moral fabric of the divine-human partnership. Jesus names that here.

The bizarre name-calling by the scribes is sandwiched by Jesus’ ethnic clan trying to restrain him (at the beginning) and then, at the end of the story, standing outside and calling him to come out.

This must be a second time because the first time they try to restrain him, he’s outside in a crowd, now he’s in a house. And this second time there’s the mention of his mother as well, a particularly troubling note because of the clear importance Jesus’ mother was to him and who we’ve come to understand her to be.

Perhaps this was her moment of doubt, a moment when she was unsure of what to do and, as a woman in that culture, perhaps she felt constrained to at least play along with the wider clan’s concern for the family honour.

In all of this we’re meant to note that there is deep division, possibly even a disowning of Jesus by certain members of his family.

It is in the face of this attempt by Jesus’ clan to control him, to restrain him, put boundaries around him that Jesus says what he says about his family. It too can sound like the language of “disowning” and so the context I’ve painted is important.

“Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And he replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother!”

And in that statement the world changed. Let us be careful to note what is, but also what is not going on here. What is not going on is the dissolution of biological families

As developmental psychology and of course simple experience has taught us there is an incredibly strong and necessary bond within the nuclear family.

At the beginning of our lives, for most people, there is no stronger emotional bond than between a mother and a child. Recent science has tracked the presence of placenta stem cells within mothers’ organs, stem cells that remain there till they die.

As new mothers will say, it’s like the size of my heart doubled when I held little sally or johnny. Fathers too will often risk everything for the sake of their children. This is a reality, by the way, not just amongst humans but amongst almost every species of mammal.

Infants who are robbed of the intimacy, touch and cuddling afforded by mother (and father) suffer often irreparable wounds that no amount of later affirmation can heal.

The Hebrew scriptures make all of this very clear. The Fifth commandment to honour our father and mother and the promise of a good life that goes with that was central to Jewish life.

And, of course, similarly linked biological families form larger groups. The original twelve tribes in Israel were crafted on the “socialist” ideals of a series of family clans forming tribes and then federally aligning for purposes of common worship, sacrifice and in case of emergency war.

This idea was countercultural and radical. Each family responsible to God and for each other and the common good. There was to be no king because such would not only end up an institution of bureaucratic oppression, taking more than his fair share from their hard won crops,

But, additionally, and this is just as important, a king would allow for offloading of the responsibility of each clan and each tribe to live “their part,” their unique and irreplaceable part in the body politic.

I’m simplifying for the sake of this homily but as a rough draft this gets at the concern in our first reading.

Jesus was aware of all of this and not opposed to it but here’s the ironic twist, the appointment of the 12 though still within ethnic Israel yet not of one clan or one tribe is pointing out, if you will, that the most important things, the most fundamental structures can become ultimate idols and when they do they close in on themselves and become instead of foundries of Shalom, foundries of Satan, to use the name-calling in our text.

Many of us live in wonderful families but some of us have experienced immediate nuclear family as disaster or something inbetween and this regardless of the initial necessary and foundational nurturing it provided us with.

What many of us experience, what many in Israel experienced was that the foundational nurturing could be turned into an enclave of control, manipulation and shame.

Whenever a nuclear family, however important our emotional connection is to it; or, whenever a nation, however loyal we are called to be in it as a citizen, or whenever a church, a synagogue, or a mosque becomes an instrument of oppression, complicit in evil, it needs to be challenged in the way Jesus does here with his own family.

I joined the Anglican church in the 1990’s when it was being held to account for it’s role in the residential schools. Primate Michael Peers apology and the financial liability we paid at the time was monumental and important and powerful reconciliation currents of healing have been flowing in the Anglican Church of Canada with indigenous peoples since.

Now it’s the Roman Catholic Church’s turn to face the music: to rip children from families and place them in residential schools with colonialist assimilation in view was horrific;

but it found its root in European families ripping children out of their own families and placing them in boarding schools or, early families all over in the medieval period, ripping children out of families and placing them in monasteries as five and six year olds.

Here’s the sad truth, these practices were often based on a misunderstanding of what Jesus says here, misinterpreted to mean that somehow the church trumps family at all costs. That’s not what he’s saying which we’ll get to shortly.

But there’s a flip side, what Jesus says here has been a balm for millions who have been bound by oppressive and narrow family structures. The future opens for them/us in these words and I’ve had the privilege of ministering with some of you who have found sisters and brothers in the Church after sometimes decades of emotional oppression, shame and abusive within your nuclear family.

Jesus’ words here are dynamic if taken in context and dynamite if taken out of context. There is no doubt that these words changed the world; monasteries and convents saved Western civilization in the Dark Ages and they were misinterpreted to rip at the necessary social fabric of colonized peoples.

We are not in a place where the church has political power, today, in the face of growing selfishness, families closing in to protect their own fortunes on the one hand, and the brokenness of the nuclear family on the other we’re in danger of forgetting that it is really wider society that suffers if we don’t have a sisterhood and brotherhood rooted in God’s Kingdom.

We need a both/and emphasis, a dialogue between the social sciences and theology and spirituality around what it looks like to live healthy in our emotional and spiritual commitments; what it looks like to be a people doing the will of God for the sake of God and neighbour.

And it is this phrase “doing the will of God” that is the clue to what Jesus says. As we look to him, the resolute love and concern that gives him the courage to reimagine the very structure of Israel as a light for the entire world, we are given pause not to idolize that which is the most emotionally necessary nor that which is the most spiritually meaningful.

We become willing, in Christ, to live in families, both natural and spiritual; we become, in Christ, willing to embrace God’s will and aid others in that quest, regardless of oppressor, to speak the truth to and in our families, both natural and spiritual and to see things like the Residential schools debacle in its full context, a context that the media skews horribly and sensationally.

Please forgive the length of this sermon, probably longer than any I’ve preached in this place, but this is not only a troubling moment, but a moment of promise, a possible Good News moment:

together we are called to leave idols, and ideology, to the side and commit ourselves alongside the disciples as “doers of God’s will” and become, in that doing, that loving, life-affirming brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, to our own biological kin, as well as gaining spiritual kin that open our lives in fabulous ways! Amen.