Reflection for 6 June 2021—A House Divided: Who Are My Kin?
Mark 3:20-38
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Today's gospel is a strange and challenging one. A disturbing one. Especially on a Sunday when we celebrate both our denominational Anniversary (96 this year!) and the beginning of Pride Month, as a faith community engaged in the process of becoming an Affirming Ministry. Layer in the shock of a horrible discovery of a mass grave of 215 innocent children who died at the Kamloops Residential School, removed from the love of their families and communities.

The story in Mark was early in Jesus' ministry. Word was spreading of his healing ministry and he was constantly being sought out by multitudes of people. Immediately before today's story, Jesus had just appointed the twelve apostles from the many disciples who had been following him. At the end of vs. 19, the same verse that records that Jesus chose Judas Iscariot as one of the twelve, Mark writes, "Then he went home." Home, Mark reports, is in Capernaum and that is where we find him in today's gospel reading.

The religious leaders were already, this early in his ministry, looking for ways to undermine him. Scribes from Jerusalem had gone north to Capernaum to help with that task. They were likely pretty certain that the assertion they make in today's story will do that, accusing him of being possessed by Beelzebub. It was both an insult and an attempt to explain the healings by Jesus. Their rationale to convince the people that Jesus "had" Beelzebub, was that it was Beelzebub, one of the chief demons, who had the power and was casting out the junior demons in the people Jesus was healing. In those days, many maladies (both physical and mental or emotional) were blamed on demon possession, so it was a logical argument.

Until Jesus heard about it and argued that it was ridiculous.

"Silly people,' I can hear him chuckling, "why would Satan throw his own fellow demons out of the people they are possessing? He would be defeating his own plan to take over the world. He would be contributing to his own demise. How absurd is that?"

"But," he told them, they had better be careful about calling God's Holy Spirit the devil. THAT is blasphemy and considered unforgiveable."

Meanwhile, his mother, sisters, and brothers were worried about him. He wasn't even getting meal breaks. And the peer pressure from the neighbours was feeling a bit

heavy, as some folks WERE falling for the rumours the religious leaders were spreading—that Jesus had become a bit unhinged.

When the message was passed through the crowd to him, that his mother and siblings were wanting a word with him, Jesus responded, 'Who are my mother and my brothers?' He was in the middle of a sermon, or a discussion of God's vision for the world, for crying out loud!

[34]And looking at those who sat around him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! [35]Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Having grown up a PK (Preacher's Kid) whose Dad was often unreachable, married to the church so to speak, I can imagine how Jesus' family felt. And now, I find myself doing similar things. Last night, I ordered pizza for supper instead of cooking a more balanced meal, because I was still wrestling with writing this sermon. Pre-Covid, poor Stephen would often be waiting for me to get home from meetings at 9 or 10 pm to cook our dinner. Heck, who am I kidding, those of you in Zoom meetings with me know that I often put off cooking dinner until after the meeting because I am sometimes doing work for the meeting right up to the last minute.

But I don't think Jesus was giving clergy or teachers or other public servants permission to neglect their families. Jesus was talking about something a bit different. He had a kinship with the people who were part of the ministry in which he was engaged. A chosen family.

'Here are my mother and my brothers! [35]Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

For many of us, The United Church of Canada—or more specifically, one of its communities of faith like East Plains United Church—has become our chosen family. We are in ministry together, doing God's work together.

And that is worth celebrating in this week of our 96th Anniversary of the Union of churches that came together to form the United Church. Those Presbyterian, Methodist, Congregational, and Union churches are the roots of this denomination.

And we are reminded in the brief history recounted on our denominational website that **"Congregations in Indigenous communities from each of the original denominations were an important factor in the effort toward church union."**[i]

We finally recognized that First Nations contribution to the United Church 87 years (87 years!!) after its inception, in a redesign of our official crest by action of the 41st

General Council, meeting in August of 2012. The original crest, designed in the 1940s, was a fish-shaped oval shield with a red St. Andrew's cross breaking it into quadrants with symbols honouring three of the predecessor churches in three of the quadrants. The background was a sombre navy blue.

The beautiful new crest incorporated "the colours often associated with the Aboriginal Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel, which reflects respect for diversity and interdependence, is often represented in the four traditional colours of yellow, red, black, and white, which incorporate important teachings from the four directions, the four stages of life, and the four seasons. …The Medicine Wheel teaches us to seek balance in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of the circle of life."[ii]

Another addition to the crest was the Mohawk phrase on the lower right side, "Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren," which means "all my relations." This phrase reflects the spirituality of Aboriginal peoples that acknowledges our interrelationship with all of creation. It also connects with Jesus' prayer in John 17, summed up in the Latin words "ut omnes unum sint," found on the lower left side of the outline, which mean "That all may be one." This is taken from John 17:21: "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, [God], are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me."

Though First Nations folks have ***always*** been part of the United Church, we United Church members who are settlers and newcomers to this continent have not always acted as if they were.

If we truly considered ourselves all kin, all related through our United Church family, how could the United Church have participated in Canada's Residential School system?

In an article posted on June 4, CBC News reports, *"More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were forced to attend church-run, government-funded schools between the 1870s and 1997.*

An amendment to the Indian Act in 1894 made attendance at residential schools compulsory. Children were removed from their families and culture and forced to learn English, embrace Christianity and adopt the customs of the country's white majority."

The National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation examining residential schools has identified the names of, or information about, more than 4,100 children who died while attending these schools, most due to malnourishment or disease.

Former senator Murray Sinclair, who chaired the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) examining residential schools, has said he believes the death count could be much higher because of the schools' poor burial records."[iii]

The TRC had found thousands of children died of tuberculosis, influenza, injuries after abuse (including sexual), neglect, malnourishment, in fires and accidents, and after running away. Burial plots will no doubt be discovered near every residential school in Canada.

Kim Echlin, daughter of EPUC and sister of Paul, wrote the following letter to the editor in response to an article in the Globe and Mail on June 2, suggesting a way to expedite that process.

VOICES OF THE DEAD

Re Sinclair Says More Remains Will Be Found at Residential School Sites (June 2): The bones of our ancestors cry to be heard. Canadians should engage the expertise of the International Commission on Missing Persons (headquartered in The Hague) to search all sites of former residential schools. With DNA and database informatics, the ICMP locates and identifies bodies with local authorities. In the Balkans, in particular Srebrenica, they have found 70 per cent of the 40,000 reported missing from the war. Canada needs to be a signatory to the ICMP's Declaration on the Role of the State in Addressing the Issue of Persons Missing as a Consequence of Armed Conflict and Human Rights Abuse. It is the right thing to do. Kim Echlin

These children were members of United Churches, as well as predecessor Methodist or Presbyterian churches and Baptist, Anglican, and Roman Catholic churches. **They were members of our churches.**

Our kin. Part of the Kin-dom of God, about which Jesus preached continuously.

We are part of a house divided. A Church divided. A nation divided.

In today's gospel story, Jesus says a house divided against itself cannot stand. And today's reading finishes with him asking who are our family? Who are our kin?

There's more for us to consider, related to those questions, in the fact that EPUC is in the process of becoming an Affirming Faith Community. Last week, we heard Jordan

Sullivan share his heart-wrenching and inspiring story as a Trans man whose faith was renewed as he embraced his God-created identity. We have had discussion sessions and other educational opportunities and will have more, such as the upcoming movie discussion on June 24. It is important that we participate in these discussion sessions before we as a congregation vote on whether to become an Affirming faith community.

The United Church as a denomination has been decades ahead of other churches in addressing LGBTQ+ concerns. General Council declared in 1988 that all people would be welcomed as members, clearing the way to ordain and commission clergy who identify as queer. That's because, in the years leading up to the 1988 membership decision, the question of ministry being open to any *member* who met the criteria for ordered ministry had already been settled.

Nevertheless, not all United Church members have supported the denomination's decisions. A few still do not. The United Church is still a house divided against some of our own kin. My prayer is that this does not apply here at EPUC.

I began this sermon by saying today's text is a challenging and disturbing one. It's one I likely might have skipped. But in light of our church's anniversary this week, the discovery of the 215 children buried at Kamloops, and the beginning of Pride Month, I recognized the importance of reflecting on this story from Jesus' early ministry.

Because, finally, those questions also relate to transitional ministry questions. The three main questions to consider in an intentional interim period are:

1) Who are we? (Who are our kin?)
2) Who are our neighbours? (Are they our kin, too?)
3) What ministry is God inviting us into, in light of those questions, as we live into the Kin-dom of God?

As we commit ourselves to address recommendations of the TRC (Truth and Reconciliation Commission), as we go through the process of becoming an Affirming community of faith, as we pray for and about our transition process and outcomes and listen for God's invitation into our future, we will be a house less divided.

"Ut omnes unum sint."

"Akwe Nia'Tetewá:neren." All my relations. May it be so.

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[i] https://united-church.ca/community-faith/welcome-united-church-canada/history-united-church-canada accessed on 5 June 2021.
[ii] https://irp-cdn.multiscreensite.com/04d73aac/files/uploaded/October%2021%2C%202018%20The%20United%20Church%20Crest-compressed.pdf, pg. 2. Accessed on 5 June 2021.
[iii] https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-residential-schools-kamloops-faq-1.6051632 accessed on 6 June 2021.