

**Second Sunday After Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX**

6 June 2021

Mark 3:30-35

There is a story that David Simmons, a former cornerback for the Dallas Cowboys, tells us about his childhood home. His father, a military man, was extremely demanding, rarely saying a kind word, always pushing him with harsh criticism to do better.... When Dave was a little boy, his dad gave him a bicycle, unassembled, with the command that he put it together. After Dave struggled to the point of tears with the difficult instructions and many parts, his father said, "I knew you couldn't do it." Then he assembled it for him. When Dave played football in high school, his father was unrelenting in his criticisms. In the backyard of his home, after every game, his dad would go over every play and point out Dave's errors. "Most boys got butterflies in the stomach before the game; I got them afterwards. Facing my father was more stressful than facing any opposing team." By college, Dave hated his father and his harsh discipline. He chose to play football at the University of Georgia because its campus was further from home than any school that offered him a scholarship. After college, he became the second round draft pick of the St. Louis cardinal's professional football club. Joe Namath (who later signed with the New York Jets), was the club's first round pick that year. "Excited, I telephoned my father to tell him the good news. He said, 'How does it feel to be second?'" (Charles Sell, *Unfinished Business*, Multnomah, 1989, p. 171ff.)

Jesus has had his own harsh critics almost from the beginning of the Gospel of Mark. After the first chapter passes by without much controversy, we arrive at chapter two of Mark. In verse 7 the Scribes accuse him of blasphemy after Jesus forgives the sins of the paralytic who was lowered from the roof of the house he is in. They say, "Why does this fellow speak this way. It is blasphemy! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Then at verse 16, after Jesus calls Levy, the Pharisees accuse him of eating with tax collectors and sinners. They ask, "Why?" to which Jesus responds, "I came not to seek the righteous, but sinners". Then, at verse 18, people criticize Jesus because his disciples don't fast like John's disciples or the Pharisee's disciples. They ask, "Why?" to which Jesus responds by using images from a wedding banquet, "They don't need to fast while the groom is still with them." Then on verse 24, once again the Pharisees are upset because Jesus' disciples pick heads of corn as they walk by a field on the Sabbath. They ask "Why?" to which Jesus responds, "The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath".

Jesus is criticized by the Scribes, the Pharisees and even some anonymous "people" whose names or professions are not given to us by Mark. By the time chapter three begins, all of his enemies are watching Jesus very closely. Verse 3:2 says, "They watched him to see if he would cure a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath, so they might accuse him." The opposition is becoming stronger. On verse 3:6, the "Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy

him". Then after more teaching and miracles, Jesus decided to go home, as verse 19 tells us. So, the episode today takes place in Jesus' hometown. By then, news of his miracles and popularity had reached home. Of course, news of his critics, rumors of mental illness or demonic possession, and rumors about his behaviors had also reached home.

The passage begins by telling us that the crowds had followed him from Jerusalem all the way to Galilee. In fact, there were so many of them pressing on Jesus and his disciples that they could not even eat. Then the passage tells us that Mary and the family heard some of the rumors (that he had lost his mind, or that he was demon-possessed). Mark tells us that they "went out to restrain him." It is easy to criticize Mary and the family for wanting to silence Jesus, but let's think a moment about what's happening here. For starters, Jesus is at home. Even though people of the day were used to itinerant preachers, who would pop in and out of the towns often, this is no regular itinerant preacher. They know this man. This is Jesus, the carpenter. He grew up in their fishing village. They remember his father, Joseph. They know and remember the quiet, young man, Jesus, working at the shop and helping his mother. They know the family doesn't come from wealth and influence and Jesus was not a Rabbinical student and had obtained no theological instruction other than what everybody else got at the temple. To the people of the town, Jesus's words and works of wonder can only mean that he is either mentally ill or demon-possessed.

In fact, some claim that it is by the power of the chief of demons that he is able to spell demons. Imagine you are home getting ready to entertain a group of friends at your annual picnic or Christmas party. Suddenly you get news that the son you have not seen in months is right outside of the local bagel shop, dressed in rags, and loudly preaching about the coming of God's kingdom. You hear that all his classmates are laughing at him and that some of the pastors and priests in town are quite angry because of his teachings. In fact, you hear that some of the priests in town are planning an exorcism. What would you do? I tell you what you would do, you would get in your car, drive as fast as you can, and go rescue your boy. You are concerned for his wellbeing, perhaps embarrassed and ashamed, concerned for the good name of the family, but most importantly, you want to protect him from critics and enemies. You want to make sure he is safe.

First Century Palestine is an honor and shame-based culture. Mary may very well have been trying to protect the family's honor. In either case, Mark does not give us the reasoning behind Mary and the family's actions. When they arrive to the place where Jesus is, there are so many people around Jesus that they can't get in. They have to send him a message that they are standing outside waiting and they want to see him. I believe Jesus knew why his family was there. He knew that whoever is not willing to forsake mother and father and siblings for the sake of the Gospel is not worthy of the Kingdom of God. He knows that nothing, even his mother's concerns, can stop him from fulfilling God's mission for him. He must preach the gospel even in the face of criticism and persecution. This is why he has come to earth. I believe it is for this reason that Jesus

says, "Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Now, I do not believe Jesus is purposely trying to offend his mother, rather he is making a powerful point. Those who do the will of God can claim a relationship with Jesus which is as powerful and strong as the biological relationship of a mother and son. Those who accept his gospel can consider themselves part of his family. They belong to him, and he belongs to them. The paralytic whose sins were forgiven is now part of his family because he accepted Jesus in faith. Some of the tax collectors and sinners who ate with Jesus at Levy's house are now part of his family because they realized their need for a Savior and they have come to believe Jesus is this Savior. The man with the withered hand has now become a part of Jesus' family because of the physical and spiritual healing he received as a gift from the Lord of the Sabbath. Jesus has come to earth to seek the sinners, the lost, those who do not belong, those forgotten even by their own families, those for whom society has no use.

And when he finds them, Jesus heals them, restores them, loves them. But he goes beyond this, he also makes them his brothers and sisters and mothers. He brings them into a new family, giving them a new identity, a place to belong, and a new status as children of God. And the most wonderful thing about this is that nowhere in Mark do we read that the paralytic was a good man, that he deserved Jesus's compassion, that he was devout or righteous. Nowhere do we hear that the man with the withered hand was deserving of Jesus's love. In fact, we hear nothing of their moral character or the inner thoughts of their hearts. All we know is that they were desperate, they approached the source of all hope and life, they were healed and forgiven, and they were brought into a new family. Not because they deserved it, but because Jesus was compassionate towards them. Jesus accepted them and was not repelled by their sin. Jesus loved them and claimed them for himself, as members of God's own family.

My friends, this passage comforts me for several reasons. First, it tells me that those who engage in Christian Ministry should expect criticism and opposition. If it happened to Jesus, it will happen to you and to me. Some people will question our motives; some will misunderstand our actions; some will place unrealistic expectations on us, expectations that even Jesus would probably not be able (or would want) to fulfill. Yet, we must remain faithful to the mission entrusted to us by the Lord himself. God's Holy Spirit will give us the strength to withstand all this criticism and to learn from it. Secondly, this passage comforts me because it reminds me of Jesus's great compassion and mercy. His acceptance of me is not dependent on my behavior, my righteousness, or the provenance of my family's last name. All I need to do to belong to his family is to acknowledge my desperate condition, to realize that Jesus is the answer to my problem, to welcome him into my heart, and to accept what he freely gives me. All I need to belong to his family is to accept his free gift of salvation. This brings me great comfort. We are his brothers and his sisters, we are children of God, we are special to him. Thanks be to God! Amen.