

Towson Presbyterian Church

June 10, 2018

Rev. Joel Strom

Galatians 3:23-29 & Mark 3:20-35

“Widening the Circle”

So this is kind of a difficult scripture reading, isn't it? For 21st century ears and listeners, it is very understandable if after hearing it you said, “Huh? What?”

First, Jesus is accused by his religious leaders of being Beelzebul, a ruler of demons. 21st century ears often have a hard time wrapping their heads around the topic of demons, and they are referenced *often* in the very beginning of Mark's gospel. And further, it's just strange that they are making such a damning accusation against Jesus, because up to this point Jesus has really only healed people in Mark, and by doing so brought wholeness and compassion and new life into people's lives who were suffering. We're only in the third chapter of Mark – Mark has just begun – and people are out to get Jesus. Really? Already?

And then there's the section about Jesus's mother and brother and sisters, which frames this reading – we begin and end with his family. When we begin at verse 20, it seems that we've already reached the point where Jesus is basically a celebrity and he needs bodyguards, because the crowd is engulfing him, so much so that he can't even get some food in his mouth. And a group of people, who probably knew him before his ministry began, they think he's crazy. They think he's lost it. They *literally* think he's out of his mind.

His family's outside asking for him, and Jesus, looking at all of those who are sitting around him, who are hanging on his every word, says this: *“Here are my mother and my brothers! And whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”*

Well that was a bit awkward, wasn't it? If his family heard what he said, which we assume they did, that must have been hard to hear. That must have been a difficult moment for them. There are a couple responses we might have after hearing Jesus's statement about his biological family and this new family he is describing that does the will of God.

Our first response might have been *to gasp* when you heard him say, *“Here are my mother and brothers!”* That just coming rude. Why would you turn your back on your family in such a way? A second response, though, after hearing his words could be a feeling of gratefulness. For some of us, our families or our origin were not necessarily healthy, and were difficult, and maybe still are, which means you might hear Jesus's words that you are a part of this new family, this new community that he is forming, and that might be comforting.

But there's also a third option, which I'd like to explore. Jesus is describing and inviting us into a whole new way of relating with and seeing one another, and it's primarily *not* by blood or birth or our biological families. When he thinks of family he's trying to widen the circle of how we

relate to one another. And this doesn't mean that he's looking down upon his family of origin; there are other stories in the gospels, especially in John's gospel, which describe his close relationship with his biological family, and especially with his mother.

In the kingdom of God that Jesus came to point to and live and exemplify, we are bound together, *we are connected*, in this kingdom not by blood or our biology, or not even by the particular denomination that we're apart of but by the relationship we share in God. Jesus is forming this new community, back then and right now, and he's redefining what "family" means in God's kingdom. And it's not defined by bloodline, and it's not even defined by making sure we're all on the same page of what we believe about God.

This new community he is creating is formed in two ways – by the waters of baptism that welcome us in and by joining Jesus in his mission.

In our first reading, the author, Paul, in his letter to the church he started in Galatia, describes their baptism that from now on they wear new clothes that represent this new identity that they have. It's a powerful image that Paul describes; the clothes they now wear, which will identify them, represent Jesus and what it means to be a part of his new community. Paul says because you are in Jesus Christ, you are no longer identified within this community as a Jew or a Greek, or slave or free, not even male or female! You are *one* in Jesus Christ.

What Paul is saying to this community in Galatia is different than equality and you are all now on equal footing. He's taking it to a whole other level and saying you are now unified in your calling – you are united to live out the mission that Jesus began. You are not just Presbyterians and Baptists, you are not just Americans and Hondurans, you are not just Republicans and Democrats. You are one in Jesus Christ.

This new community, this new family, is formed in two ways: through the waters of baptism that claims us and tells us that we are and always will be children of God, and it is formed by those who are willing to work and live for the values of the kingdom that Jesus came to point to and exemplify. The kingdom of God that keeps breaking down barriers and walls that describes who's in and who's out, the kingdom of God that announces to all people the Good News of God's love.

For the past year I've been meeting monthly with area clergy, none of which are Presbyterian. We've met through *Well for the Journey*, an organization that is literally one block from us. Our group has consisted of 6 of us plus two staff from The Well, and we met again this past Monday. We meet in a house owned by the Benedictine Sisters of Baltimore, which is west on Joppa Road, just a couple miles down the road from here. And once-a-month we gather in a retreat house that is right next to the house that the Sisters live in.

Towards the end of Monday's gathering we had a little free time and I took a walk on the grounds of the monastery. It was not raining, which was nice, and a change, and actually it was almost perfect outside. I noticed one of the sisters doing some yardwork. They have a labyrinth and I took a few minutes to walk it. And as I was walked by their main house I noticed two flags

that framed the entrance. On the left hung the American flag, and on the right was a blue flag and in the middle of the flag was a picture of the earth.

I made my way back to the retreat house, and after finishing up our session, Greg, the director of *Well for the Journey*, asked if I could drive him back. After handing in the key to the house he hopped into my car, and right as we turned onto Joppa Road, Greg said to me, “Have you heard the story of the Benedictines?”

No, I haven’t.

“About 5 years ago they had a knock on the door. Waiting outside was a woman. She was a refugee from Afghanistan. And through a few unfortunate circumstances she had nowhere to go. She was Muslim. She was homeless. And she was pregnant.

The sisters welcomed her in and cared for her as their own. And that New Year’s Eve she gave birth to a baby girl, and for the first two years of her life she grew up and was loved on by the sisters of the Benedictine Monastery. Eventually, the mom and her daughter found a home and moved out,” but, as Greg told me, “they occasionally stop by, and there is joy and celebration from both sides when they are together.”

Jesus is drawing people from all kinds of experiences, walks of life, races and ethnicities into this one family of God.

And we’re a part of it! And to be a part of it means to know that you are a child of God. But it also means to know that there’s work in front of us and we are rolling up our sleeves, because together we are announcing the Good News of God’s love to all people.

Thanks be to God.