

Pentecost 3, Proper 5-Year B

June 10, 2018

All Saints', Littleton, NH

The Rev. Curtis Metzger

1 Sam 8: 4-11 (12-15), 16-20, (11:14-15)

Psalm 138

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-35

Last week I went on a little long. I'm going to chalk it up to a leftover anesthesia effect from my colonoscopy....well, that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it! And so, I feel I owe you some time, so this morning is going to be much shorter. Really people, if I do that again, please feel free to call a 'time out' or something!

As we ease into summer and out of the pandemic, I have been finding myself asking, "What just happened?" The year seems to have been a blur of activity for me, which, I know, is unlike the experience of the year for many of you. There certainly has been the technological challenge, but underlying it all has really been the struggle to find ways to continue as community. I am mentally exhausted by it all. And yet, I've been pondering what the experience has taught us about the nature of community and family. There is the microcosm of how our own families adapted, and our parish community, but there is also

the 'community' of the country, as it were. The pandemic seemed only to enhance the deep divisions of our nation over the last year. The words in the gospel lesson this morning are calling to us---'a house divided against itself cannot stand'!

But the pandemic has taught us things too. It has broadened our ability to connect in new ways, and though Zoom hasn't been for everyone, for some it became a vital way of feeling connected; and in some small groups, people actually got to know one another better. In our weekly online service we stayed connected to the people of the parish through recordings read by various parishioners, videos of Jim playing our organ and piano, and sermons by me, Paul, Kathy, and Linda. We also rediscovered the value of the telephone and hand-written letters; and of course, the incredible value of email to share important news and keep us connected. How about you? What did you learn during the pandemic?

[Invite reflections]

I'm going to just focus on the gospel passage this morning for a few minutes and see what wisdom is hidden in this story. In this passage from Mark we hear, in classic Markan style, the beginning of a story, then another one wedged in, and then the end of the story. It begins with Jesus' charismatic

influence starting to be misunderstood and rumors flying about his mental health, so his family and friends come to 'rescue' him. Then the passage shifts quickly to this confrontation with the scribes who accuse him of being from Beelzebul. The root of this name Beelzebul goes back to a Syrian god and literally means "Lord of the house", but in Jewish use it had begun to be associated with Satan/demons and they mockingly changed the name over time to "Beelzebub", meaning "Lord of the flies" (Aha!, you wondered where that name came from!). There followed Jesus' reply about how can Satan cast out Satan, and a house divided cannot stand. Again, good students of American history will immediately remember how Abraham Lincoln pondered this verse, and indeed the whole country pondered it at the time of the Civil War. Jesus' final parting shot to them was that blasphemy against the Holy Spirit was the unforgivable sin; in this case, attributing good to evil.

And then we return to his family and Jesus says this powerful line about, how in his kingdom, as it were, his family were the ones that do God's will. And for centuries scholars and commentators have been a little squirmy on this---it sounds rather hard on the bonds of family. But it certainly points to the ultimate allegiance that Jesus would have us have! But notice that he didn't say his family was no longer family, only that his family can be bigger! One of Jesus' most

striking characteristics is how he continually draws the circle bigger and welcomes people in. [Share the poem from the framed piece given me by St. Stephen's].

*He drew a circle that shut me out –
Heretic, rebel, a thing to flout.
But Love and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!* (Edwin Markham)

I think this is a fundamental challenge and question for us as the people of God right now: after years of division and this crippling pandemic: How do we draw the circle bigger and reach out to others and bring them in to a place of safety, to a place of love and belonging? In some sense it would seem that many people are starved for this sense of connection after the pandemic, and perhaps they have had time to contemplate the meaning of life and are looking for something more. This should be the time that we greet people with a big smile (wherever we don't have to wear masks still, or 'smiling eyes' otherwise!) and invite them into our community. Maybe, in fact, this is the time for a campaign of sorts to do just that. You can make it your personal campaign!

[Re-read the poem]