

PROPER FIVE, YEAR B, PENTECOST 3, JUNE 9, 2024

There's a story about a monk who lived in the 6th century who drew a circle and put a dot in the middle of the circle. From the point in the middle of the circle he drew lines to points around the circle. The straight lines drawn from the circumference to the center are the lives of human beings," Dorotheos said. "...To move toward God, then, human beings move from the circumference of the circle to the center. But at the same time, the closer they are to God, the closer they become to one another; and the closer they are to one another, the closer they become to God."

Keep that in mind as we turn to the Gospel this morning. It is interesting to note that in the first few chapters of the Gospel of Mark Jesus is described as angry, mad and demon possessed. Not the usual characteristics we would assign to Jesus. What is true is that Jesus is always more challenging than we expect, more outrageous, and more egregious.

In this story that questions Jesus' sanity, we have to ask the question why is Jesus such a threat to his family, religious authorities and the government? To get the answer we just need to flip the script. What was Jesus espousing that upset the people so much? It was the scribes who came from Jerusalem who had the biggest problem and questioned his sanity because of what he was preaching. Jesus was telling the people how angered and aggrieved he was at the religious sanctimony, economic exploitation, political oppression, and social exclusion, that he vividly pointed out to them. And when Jesus disrupted this cultural status quo, he is scapegoated as insane.

Now many of us have dealt with family members who have mental health issues so I think we can understand why Jesus' family was called to intervene. We're told, "His family went to take charge of him because they were told, 'He is out of his mind.'" First and foremost they were probably embarrassed by his actions and his words. He was a good Jewish boy who had been raised to obey God, the commandments and abide by the rituals and laws that kept the community together. Why would he be tossing all that he was taught aside because what he was saying was heretical, anti government that could come back on his family which could impact their very survival. So, fear is another motivating factor that led his family to attempt an intervention. What would, not just the Jewish authorities but the Roman authorities do as well, to their family because of their familial association with Jesus. It's a dilemma for them. On one hand they see the good he is doing with his healing ministry but what he's preaching and the people he is attracting – all the discards of society – is alarming.

Then Jesus brusquely dismisses his nuclear family by saying "Who are my mother and brothers and sisters?" That had to really hurt his family. I don't doubt that many of us have had hurtful disagreements with members of our family who might have disowned us or we them. Family dynamics are never easy especially when someone steps out of the norm of what is expected of them or disavows what their family believes.

In many respects Jesus is coming into his own. What I mean is that Jesus is forging a new identity that began with his baptism and the recognition of what he is called to be. Think about it this way. It's not unlike many immigrants of all nationalities who ask themselves who am I? What am I? Am I American or Indian or Italian or Spanish? Who are my people? To whom do I belong? Where should my cultural

loyalties lie? Redefining one's identity, whether in a family or in a religious institution, is a provocative act, and it almost always comes at a price. Jesus is forging his identity as God's beloved to whom he belongs above his Jewish religious identity. He's putting aside the labels of who he should be by everyone else's standards. This is why they question Jesus' sanity.

It's very easy for us, having the benefit of historical hindsight, to write off these people who accused Jesus of insanity and demon possession. Hindsight is a neat and tidy process for us moderns as if we never mistake evil for good, or bravery for insanity. The fact is, neither Jesus's family nor the scribes from Jerusalem are evil or ill-intentioned. They are earnest people dedicated to maintaining stability during a troubled time. Jesus's family desires order and peace in the domestic sphere, and the scribes desire order and peace in the religious sphere. Don't we all? They're not out to obstruct God; they just want to keep things respectable.

But perhaps the biggest upset of this entire story is who does Jesus say his family is? His response is even more provocative and pays a far higher price than we can even imagine. Can you picture the scene? Outside the house stand the insiders — the family, the religious folk, the pious, the careful. They think they have God pinned down. They know what the Holy Spirit is supposed to do and Jesus doesn't fit the bill. Inside the house sit the outsiders — the misfits, the rejects, the tax collectors, the prostitutes. They're not interested in dogma or piety; they just need love and they seem to have found it in a man who heals the sick and feeds the hungry and is willing to stand in the midst of them. So, sitting there smack in the center of the sick, the deviant, the hungry, the unorthodox and the unwashed Jesus says "This. This is my family."

Make no bones about it this is absolutely outrageous. Jesus isn't calling for surface change here; in many respects he's burning things down. He's going for deep, institutional, and systemic change. Outside is in, and inside is out, and the people least likely to get it are the ones who consider themselves the most knowledgeable, the most "churchy," and the most spiritually stable. We need to be careful at all times with our certainties.

As disruptive and dismissive Jesus is of those on the outside, imagine what it must have felt like to be inside the house with Jesus that day. To have someone safe and loving who understands their hunger to belong. Regardless of our circumstances, we all know what it's like to yearn for someone who can hold all of who we are, and love us still, without flinching. That's exactly what Jesus does for the crowds that day. He invites them in, he asks them to stay, and he makes them family. And that means ourselves too.

As divisive as his words are Jesus doesn't divide us rather his words rebuild us. He's rebuilding us to make us more welcoming and more inclusive. Jesus desires healing for the whole world. That means us too. It's hard to look at the division and inner conflict sometimes within our own lives. How and to what extent have we created conflict and division within our relationships? Ask yourselves what is it that shatters your life? Anger, resentment, greed, insecurity, perfectionism, sorrow, loss, fear, envy, guilt, loneliness. There are all sorts of forces, things, events, sometimes even people that make our lives broken. But Jesus is stronger than anything that fragments our lives. There is nothing about your life or my life that cannot be put back together by the love God in Christ.

Back to the circle that Dorotheos drew. Jesus worked throughout his ministry to draw his hearers deeper into this circle. He defined the circle not as a place for folks who have a shared affinity, or who think the same way, or who hold all the same beliefs in common. The circle goes deeper than race, gender, sexuality, economic status. The circle embraces and draws upon an image and model for the relationship he seeks to have with us. Jesus simply has a notion of kinship that goes deeper and broader than ours often does. You know the Zulus in South Africa greet each other with “Sawubona (sa wu bo na) which means I see you. And the response is Ngikhona (na-gik-ho-na) meaning I am here. It is a perfect greeting that embraces Jesus’ call to trace his circle wide, calling us all to see each other and be kinfolk to him by doing what God desires us to do.

In these days there is a lot of things that works to divide us and turn us away from one another. May we instead draw closer to each other as we stretch toward the God who lives at the center of the circle, and who encompasses it and us all around into one big family. Remember to be a member of the family of God is pure grace and pure love. Now I think that’s a family everyone wants to be a part of. Amen.