

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

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## Redrawing Boundaries

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Jesus is making enemies all over the place here in the first few chapters of Mark's Gospel. Recall our reading from last week. Jesus defends his disciples pulling and eating grain on the Sabbath, then he has the audacity to heal a man with a withered hand on the Sabbath too. That reading concluded: "The Pharisees went out and immediately conspired with the Herodians against him, how to destroy him."<sup>1</sup>

Here, just a few verses later, we find Jesus making enemies of the Scribes from Jerusalem too. Though this wasn't his first encounter with that group. Back in Mark 2 the scribes considered Jesus forgiving sins to be blasphemy! No wonder Jesus flips things on them here in Mark 3, accusing the Scribes themselves of committing blasphemy by claiming the spirit in Jesus...the Holy Spirit by which people are being healed and demons cast out...is unclean.<sup>2</sup>

Why all this conflict though? Is what Jesus is doing **that** much of a threat? Really...he's healing some people, he's forgiving people their sins, he's exorcising demons. That's all good, isn't it?

Well...not from the perspective of those who benefit from the status quo. Requiring the sick and demon-possessed to offer sacrifice at the Temple kept the religious leaders funded. Being able to accuse the victims of diseases like leprosy of having those conditions as a result of their sin, or their parent's sin is a great way of maintaining control over who's in and who's out. Using the Law as a bludgeon to keep people in line worked well to keep people compliant. Jesus threatens all of that. Jesus threatens the status quo...he threatens the broken systems of oppression and control.

But it goes even deeper than that! What was the first conflict in this Gospel? For that we go back to Mark 1:12-13, "And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the

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<sup>1</sup> Mark 3:6 (NRSVue)

<sup>2</sup> Mark 28-30

wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tested by Satan, and he was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him.” The first conflict Jesus faced in his ministry was with Satan, the “ruler of the world” as John’s Gospel names him.

Jesus faces this test and rejects Satan...rejects (as Matthew 4 and Luke 4 tell us) using divine power for personal desires, rejects testing God’s faithfulness, and rejects having power and control over all the kingdoms of the world. Jesus rejects all the things that appeal to those who seek power and control over others. Jesus rejects power and authority...Jesus rejects empire, the empire of the Temple and religious authorities, the empire of Herod, the empire of Rome, and ultimately, the empire of evil which rules this world.

It should come as no surprise that, after rejecting all of that in the wilderness, agents of the status quo, agents of power and oppression, agents of Satan...yes, that’s what I’m calling the scribes, Pharisees, and Herodians...arrive on the scene to test and antagonize Jesus. Empire will brook no challenge. Systems of oppression and control will not tolerate rejection. And we all know where Jesus’ rejection will ultimately land him...the cross.

The next agents of the status quo though...they’re more surprising, more insidious. It’s Jesus’ family this time. They are unwitting agents of the status quo, of the empire, but nonetheless, that’s what they are. I can’t really blame them though. If my beloved brother were attracting the wrong kind of attention, I’d be tempted to go try to “talk some sense into him” as it were. Just ask him to tone it down a little bit...or lie low for a while, nothing too onerous.

But Jesus flatly rejects even this reasonable-seeming concern. Instead he does something incredible...he redraws the most fundamental, basic boundary in Hebrew culture of that time. He redefines family in a way that we still struggle with today. “‘Who are my mother and my brothers?’ And looking at those who sat around him, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.’”<sup>3</sup>

Let me remind you of who was crowded around Jesus as this point, who Jesus is now calling his family. There’s some fishermen, Simon, Andrew, James, and John; there’s a tax collector named Levi; and then there’s the sick and diseased, the demon-possessed, the tax collectors and the sinners, people coming from all over, gentile regions and Hebrew regions both...the common factor being people usually forced to

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<sup>3</sup> Mark 3:33b-34

the margins of their communities. This is the group that Jesus is looking at as he redefines family.

Jesus is identifying with...in a powerful way...the rejects of the world. Those without power and influence, those without wealth or status. Jesus is identifying with everyone for whom the status quo is not working. Those being taken advantage of by those in power. He's identifying with everyone lost in the cracks of the broken system, the people ground to grist under the heel of various empires. And he's calling them **family**! How amazing is that?

“Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”<sup>4</sup> Jesus is radically redrawing the boundaries of his family, of God's family. He accuses the religious leaders present of committing blasphemy, of standing in the way of God's will. God's family is not defined by positions or power, it's not defined by outward displays of piety, and it's certainly not defined by Law-driven purity tests. God's family is defined by God's will.

God's will that the world know of the nearness of God's Kingdom. God's will that people's relationship with God be renewed through repentance and that people's relationships with one another be renewed through that same repentance. God's will for forgiveness and mercy. God's will for healthy and whole communities. God's will that people not suffer illness and disease. God's will that people be fed and sheltered, clothed and welcomed. God's will for wholeness of mind, body, and soul. God's will for wholeness of community and world too. God's will for us to be righteous, to live as we were created to live, to walk the Way that Christ invites us to follow.

In the end, the enemies Jesus makes, the conflicts he find himself in, all have one source: two fundamentally different ways of living. The established order, the empire, Satan, thrives on control, exclusion, and fear. Jesus offers a radically different alternative: a family differentiated by God's will, overflowing with love, mercy, grace, and compassion. A family open to all who seek it.

This new way of life, these redrawn boundaries, may seem counter-intuitive, even threatening. But as we continue to Walk the Way of Christ, as we embrace this inclusive family, we become agents of change in the world. We join in God's redemptive and creative will for the world. We join in God's radical redrawing of our boundaries, the radical reorienting of our lives. The Way isn't easy, but grounded in God's boundless love we can work on dismantling empire, those within us and those around us, one act of love at a time, one act of redrawing boundaries at a time. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> Mark 3:34