

It's early on in his ministry. So far, Jesus has recruited a few followers, healed on the Sabbath, driven out a demon or two, healed a half dozen or more, and generally begun to gain the attention of the religious leaders. He's moved about Galilee and the towns thereabouts, and he's drawing people to him from even farther afield. He's making a bit of a splash, shall we say.

And now, in this passage from Mark 3, he returns to his hometown, Nazareth, in order to continue his teaching. He has just officially appointed his twelve apostles, and one could assume he's headed home in order to try out the new team and see how it all fits.

In some of the other gospels, he returns a little later as if he wants to get his sea legs first. But Mark sends him from baptism, and temptation, and recruitment and healing, right into the heart of the conflict that Jesus will face until the end of his days. His conflict with the religious establishment.

Let us listen now to the reading from the third chapter in Mark.

Typical to Mark, there is no time to waste. And so the gospel drops Jesus right into the thick of the debate. Who is Jesus *really* serving? Is he serving the God of his people -

the God of the traditions that have held his tribe together for centuries - even in diaspora and oppression?

Or is he serving a God that folks are still trying to get a handle on? One that feels beyond their control?

And maybe that's the whole point. Right? Jesus wants to move these folks beyond where they are.

Jesus is not against religion, per se. But he does challenge again and again the human constructions that grow up around a faith. Piece by piece he isolates how it is their faith has become so codified that it operates a lot more like the government that oppresses them than the liberating work of a loving God.

Look beyond. Let go, Jesus says. Let's get to the heart of it all.

And by getting to the heart of it all, he means the very center of life in his time. The family household. And so this passage begins with him entering the house.

The familial line was the center of life. As one scholar succinctly puts it, "The extended family structure determined personality and identity, controlled vocational prospects,

and most importantly facilitated socialization. . . . kinship is the backbone of the very social order Jesus is struggling to overturn.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus moves into the house, people gather around and fill the space as they have before, and his blood family panics. They can sense where this is all headed and it doesn't bode well for their well-being. If *he* gets into trouble with the authorities, then they're in trouble. That's kinship culture.

Within the framework of the household then, Jesus also takes on the religious family. The Pharisees approach him because they are convinced or they *want* to be convinced that he is doing the work of Satan.

Jesus is set within the familial household as he spars with the religious household - all of this pointing to how patterns and accepted behavior of right rule and right living have been blocks to the work of God.

He is there to draw this community in - all the people there in that house - apostles, followers, Pharisees and family. Jesus wants to draw them in and open them up, help them to loosen the ways in which they define who they are and thus who their God is.

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<sup>1</sup> Ched Myers, *Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, New York: Orbis Books, 168.

Who is my mother, my brother and my sister? he asks. Those who love God, that's who.

What is remarkable in all of this is that he manages both to draw the circle wider - getting people to see themselves in a broader context - even as he is also inviting them in closer.

Jesus reminds them that the house of *God* is ruled by something greater than fear - the fear that drives many in their midst to accuse him of being possessed by demons.

The house of God is governed by an open invitation to everyone. To everyone to engage with the work of the Spirit and thus engage with one another. Jesus invited them to be drawn into the *true* work of God and thus be drawn toward one another beyond the strictures of family and tribe and religious authority.

Dorotheos of Gaza was a desert father - monk and abbot - of the 6th century. After living and studying at the monastery Abba Serid near Gaza, he went on to found his own monastery. He is remembered today for his writings which collected together have been titled, *Directions on Spiritual Training*. Incidentally his feast day was two days ago, June 5th.

He wrote this: "Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the center, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to

God walk towards the center of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.”

Jesus recognizes in this passage that the Pharisees and his own family members are playing by the same restrictive rules. Rules that limit God’s ministry. Strictures that define boundaries to a boundless God.

And so he challenges us today as well. Jesus enters this house and asks who is my mother, my brother, my sister, my father? Those who hear the voice of God and answer yes. This is a faith that works well beyond rules.

Wendell Berry describes the dance<sup>2</sup>,

They move in the ancient circle  
of the dance. The dance and the song  
call each other into being. Soon  
they are one — rapt in a single  
rapture, so that even the night  
has its clarity, and time  
is the wheel that brings it round.

The ancient circle that draws everyone in. That says each of us has a seat at the table, a spot in the dance. Drawn in that dance closer to one another, and thus closer to the rapture that is God.

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<sup>2</sup> Wendell Berry, *The Wheel*.

That is Jesus' invitation in this passage. To dance beyond the boundaries that we are convinced are there to protect us. And thus be liberated to be enraptured by our loving God.

Amen.