



## ARE YOU IN?

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Words cannot express how wonderful it feels to be back here at the Brick Church. For those of you who don't know me, I'm a fruit, theologically speaking, of this beautiful garden that is Brick Church, and just one among many. My daughter Beatrice who just graduated from college a couple of weeks ago was baptized by Dr. Herbert Anderson and Rev. Michael Lindvall patiently counseled me as I "reflected" on the idea of going to a seminary, until one day he finally blurted out, ever so gently, because it's Michael, you know, "Takako, one can only reflect so much!" With that nudge, I came under the care of the Session to discern the path for ordination. And, of course, I had the Clerk of Session Emeritus, our dear Ellsworth, signing off on many documents that needed the Session approval to move forward in my ordination journey. His physical absence here today only heightens the sense of his continued presence. This church really feels like home to me.

Then again, a church always had a way of making me feel at home, no matter where in the world it was and what it looked like, big or small, even when it wasn't Presbyterian. I could be walking into the church for the first time; so long as I knew it was a church, I was immediately at home. Maybe some of you are not as adaptable as me, but still, how often we speak of our "home church," or our "church home." What is it about the church that it becomes home to us?

For the children's message one Sunday, an associate pastor at the time taught the children this about the church. She said to them, "OK, put your hands together like this to make a church, and here is the steeple, and here the doors. And open the door and what do you see, all the people!" The lesson was that it was the people in it that made the church a church.

If the church is a home, then the people who fill it would be family to one another, for home is where the family is. But how so? Sure, it's easy to give a smart answer from the Sunday school, "because the church is God's House and we are all God's children." Yeah, but really, how?

This question is at the heart of the passage from Mark's Gospel we just heard.

As Debra mentioned in the preface to the Scripture, the scene that is presented to us today opens with Jesus and his disciples having just gone inside a home. To give a little more background, before Jesus healed those who were sick in body as well as in spirit, before the large crowd gathered,

before Jesus appointed the apostles in the mountain, he had first pronounced that the kingdom of God is at hand, as if to show all his words and deeds that followed manifested the kingdom of God.

Now Jesus and the disciples are in the house. Momentarily, the house is filled with an overwhelming crowd who had followed Jesus. Whose home is it? We don't know. But we do know it was a place they would break bread together; the original text says "they couldn't be eating bread for the crowd." It is not a normal situation. So, Jesus is in a house, trying to break bread with his followers; hold that image and set it aside for later.

Outside, his family hears about this and says "He's out of his mind" and try to go get hold of him, perhaps out of concern that he may be in danger, or possibly to make him stop embarrassing the family by causing such commotions. For the Jesus' family, all is not well with this picture. I get curious when I hear a very American expression in the Bible, such as "Out of his mind" here; what did it really say in the original language? Interestingly, the Greek expression that is translated here as he is "out of his mind, or beside himself, or lost his marbles" is "he stood outside." So, his family is literally saying Jesus "is standing outside," while they are the ones standing outside of the house where Jesus is. Hold that image for later, too.

Now we hear from the scribes. The scribes were highly trained professionals who copied the Torah, the Book of the Law, following strict rules. So they are all about rules and regulations, and their lives literally

depend on it. Like the crowd, they have seen or heard about Jesus' "casting out demons" business, and they accuse Jesus of collusion with Satan.

As I said earlier, it was immediately after Jesus pronounced the kingdom of God is at hand, he began to teach, cast out demons and heal sick people; his words and deeds were the ways of preaching the kingdom of God." Jesus' wondrous works manifest God's merciful, mighty presence in the midst of our lives; that is the kingdom of God and that is the Good News! But the scribes are quick to respond, No, he's a Fake News!

What did the scribes say, exactly? They said that Jesus "has Beelzebul, and by the ruler of the demons he casts out demons. Beelzebub is the Canaanite's divine name for the Prince of the demons. Do they really believe in Demons? Yes, they did, but not as we think today. They attributed to demons the forces that worked against life and wholeness.

They were saying that Jesus was defeating the forces of evil by working with the boss of the evil. That's an odd claim involving self-contradiction, and Jesus tells them so, but not before first calling them to himself; Jesus invites them into the house to think about this together. He tells them, any entity, whether it is a nation or a household or even Satan, if there is an internal split, it cannot sustain itself.

Thus Jesus disproves their claim, but Jesus goes further than stating the obvious, by extending the parable. He continues, "No one can enter a strong

man's house and plunder his property without first tying up the strong man, then indeed the house can be plundered." Here, Jesus is telling them how the casting out of demons is done. Earlier in the Gospel, Jesus is referred to as the "Stronger One." The Strong Man Satan's house is already plundered and demons cast out by Jesus the Stronger One. There is no split or division, but a clear victory of Jesus over Satan; the kingdom of God is at hand.

So why did the scribes think Jesus was colluding with the Prince of the demons? Earlier, Jesus healed a sick man by ordering the unclean spirit to come out of him, and he did it even though it was Sabbath. Jesus was breaking what was the holy law to the Scribes: You shall observe Sabbath by keeping it holy. Whatever the version of that law the Scribes were upholding, Jesus was breaking it, and they took offense to that, even though they would agree the act of "casting out demons" in itself is good. In their eyes, "casting out demons while breaking the law" constituted collusion with Satan on Jesus' part. The scribes translated the faithfulness to God to mean the obedience to the law, and they left no room for discernment. They judged Jesus guilty based on his meddling with this clear-cut criterion. Jesus is functioning on a level that is new to them and in a moment defensiveness, they considered only the "law breaking" part of his saving act and accused Jesus of being on Satan's side.

Having called them to his side, Jesus does not let the scribes go but gives them a warning. "People will be forgiven for their sins and whatever

blasphemies they utter, but whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit can never have forgiveness, but is guilty of an eternal sin, because they had said “He has an unclean spirit.” This sounds harsh. But Jesus is not condemning the scribes here; rather, he’s helping them reflect on their own way of thinking and showing them where such thinking leads to. If the teachings and the saving deeds of Jesus manifest the kingdom of God, then it is the work of the Holy Spirit. To take the work of the Holy Spirit and attribute it to Satan is blasphemous; it is to reverse good and evil; it is to call God evil and Satan good. Such sin would not be forgivable not because God’s mercy or grace is limited, but because it makes one incapable of opening oneself to the source of forgiveness.

Jesus is the righteousness of God who would never forsake us for our cluelessness. Those scribes most likely did not see they were blaspheming against the Holy Spirit when they accused Jesus of colluding with Satan. Jesus reached out to his accusers, calling them into the house where he was to help them discern. From our human perspective, knowing the Will of God is not simple and clear, nor is it simply a matter of obeying the rules and regulations.

As Chaplain at Menaul School, I organize the Mission Week for our high school students. The Freshmen stay in Albuquerque and join the work of local churches or ministry groups. The Sophomores go beyond Albuquerque but stay within the state of New Mexico. The Junior class has been participating in a ministry at the US/Mexico border in AZ called Frontera de Cristo. It’s a

ministry of our national church, the Presbyterian Church (USA) that meets the needs of the migrants in various ways. It is the most popular and successful Mission program among our students, but there are also opposing voices: while helping the people in dire situations is a good Christian thing to do, those migrants may be breaking the law; should we be helping people and undermine the law? It's a question I anticipate to have with students as well as parents as we plan this trip every year. It's not just a political question. It is a deeply theological conversation with spiritual consequences. If we were to take a cue from Jesus, where would that lead us?

In the words of Father Richard Rohr, a Franciscan friar and spiritual writer based in New Mexico, "Following Jesus is not a "salvation scheme" or a means of creating social order as much as it is *a vocation to share the fate of God for the life of the world*. Some people are overly invested in religious ceremonies, rituals, and rules about naming who's in and who's out. They love to protect boundaries. Jesus did not come to create a spiritual elite or an exclusionary system."

Now, let's go back to Jesus' family; his mother and brothers are by now standing outside the house and are calling for him. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" Jesus asks.

Whether you thank God daily for your "perfect" family or lament its dysfunction, whether your family is biological or a family by choice, whether your family enjoys the legal recognition and protection, or exists solely by the strength of the bond of your love, whether your reality of family is shaped by

its absence from your life, the idea of “family as it ought to be” evoke for many of us a sense of belonging, where you break bread and share meals together, a place of nurture and growth, a safe place to ask questions and make mistakes. You might rebel against it, you might run away from it, you might fight it, but if it’s your Family, by default, you are IN it.

For Jesus, even our earthly family was not the ultimate boundary to be protected as defining one’s identity in relation to the others. This is NOT to say that he didn’t love his family nor that the family wasn’t important to him. Rather, BECAUSE Jesus understood the central place and the weight our understanding of Family carried for our core identity, for better or for worse, he used the familial language of “my mother, my brothers and my sisters” to elucidate the ultimate relationship that shapes our identity and our destiny: those who would do God’s will is a member of God’s Household where we are our true and deepest self.

When the rubber hits the road, will you spend your life living out the Good News you have received, in whatever form it takes, that Love trumps Hate and Good prevails over Evil. Will you put your trust in the power stronger than the strong man Satan, refusing to accept as true the apparent triumph of Satan in the world all around us. Again, discerning the will of God is not always easy; we need a place where we can be with Jesus, learn from his words and deeds, ask questions and make mistakes, just as those apostles did, in the house, with Jesus, trying to break bread.... That’s home

and that's church. This brings me back full circle to my question. How is it that a church becomes a home? It's a place to break bread together, learn from Jesus together, to discern and DO the will of God together.

Call it Family or Church, those of us who take a cue from the way Jesus lived, died, and was resurrected, form a band of doers of God's will, pursuing justice, peace and reconciliation, the Love Supreme, despite our own inadequacies and together with our brothers and sisters, in the face of evil everywhere. And this band shall not be divided but is united in its bandleader Jesus. This House is united under Jesus the Head of the Household, to discern and to do God's will. So, are you in?