**Mark’s Gospel: *Jesus and the Kingdom of God***

**Sunday September 29, 2019**

**Mark #4: *Binding the Strong Man* (Mark 3:20-35)**

**1. Introduction: *Liar, Lunatic, or Lord***

Whenever I read C.S. Lewis, I’m inspired by him. Now, I realize that he was just a man and his writings are not on the level of Scripture. His arguments, analogies, and theology are not perfect. Nevertheless, I am thankful to God for this wonderful servant who has had such a significant impact on many people including myself. I read the *Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe* to my kids. My personal library contains many of his classics, such as *The Screwtape Letters, Surprised by Joy,* and *A Grief Observed.* One of his most famous and influential works is *Mere Christianity,* his thoughtful summary and defense of the Christian faith. One of the most familiar passages from that book is this one about Jesus. Lewis wrote:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: ‘I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God.’ That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to” (*Mere Christianity,* p. 52).

This line of reasoning, though not original to Lewis, has come to be known as the *liar*, *lunatic* or *Lord* argument. Many have used it in Christian apologetics, while others have pointed out its weaknesses. But despite its deficiencies, it does counter the notion that Jesus was merely a wise teacher of ethics and nothing more. The Gospels portray a fuller picture of Jesus that defies any attempt to minimize his person. The earnest reader of the Gospels must consider all the information and come to a decision. For Jesus to have made his claims of divinity and have been only a wise human teacher does not line up with evidence. Either he was who he claimed to be, or he was a fraud or had delusions of grandeur.

This morning’s Gospel lesson presents a similar challenge to the reader. Was he mad, bad, or God? Even when Jesus walked the earth, opinions were divided about him. Some thought he was mentally ill, and others thought he was in league with Satan. Still others followed him, sat at his feet, and became his new family. This passage from Mark’s Gospel challenges each one of us to respond to Jesus; either to dismiss him as a madman or an evil sorcerer or to bow before him as Lord.

**1. The Opinion of his Family: *He’s out of his mind***

Mark begins this episode by noting that Jesus’ popularity continued to grow. On this occasion Jesus and his disciples entered a house and a large crowd gathered there as well. Though not explicitly stated, but clearly implied, the needs of the crowd were so great that Jesus and his disciples did not even have time to sit down for a meal as they ministered to the people (Mark 3:20). When Jesus’ family heard about the needy crowds and his missed meals, they set out to seize him and bring him home. In their opinion, his behaviour indicated that he was out of his mind (Mark 3:21). Here, we discover that Jesus’ family greatly misunderstood him and his ministry. They perceived his devotion to God’s mission and his urgent drive to do ministry as indications of his derangement. Concerned for his mental and physical health, they set out to have a family intervention and bring him home.

The reaction of Jesus’ family is like that of some parents when their children take a sudden interest in spiritual matters or passionately embrace a political cause. They might become alarmed and label them fanatical. They may try to dissuade or even forcefully stop them. But even if these parents’ efforts are best intentioned, they are restraining. A similar dynamic is found in this passage. Jesus was doing the work of the kingdom and his family wanted to seize him and prevent him from accomplishing his tasks.

The response of Jesus’ family to his mission places his calls to discipleship in an interesting light. Jesus’ words in Matthew 10:37 seem a bit extreme to us: *“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”*

This episode in Mark reveals that Jesus’ statements about the cost of discipleship were a reality in his own life. The challenge to place God’s will above family was reflective of his personal experience. Jesus can call others to make this sacrifice because he too made this sacrifice to follow God’s call.

Jesus’ family will make reappearance in verse 31 when they arrive at the house where he is and sent a messenger in to tell him that they are waiting outside. During this pause in the storyline about his family, a group of religious experts appears and offers their opinion about Jesus (Mark 3:22-30). The mingling of these two stories together is a literary device that Mark frequently uses. Imagine a sandwich, with two pieces of bread on the outside and meat and cheese on the inside. Here, Mark’s sandwich looks like this:

* *Jesus’ family sets out to seize him and they said, “He is out of his mind”* (3:20-21)
* The teachers of the law come from Jerusalem and they said, “He has an unclean spirit” (3:22-30)
* *Jesus’ family arrives and sends a messenger in to get him* (3:31-35)

What’s the point of this sandwich? Here, Mark is drawing attention to significant parallels between these two stories. While the accusation of demon possession is far more serious than the charge of insanity, both are presented as wrong responses to Jesus. Both opinions about Jesus reveal a misunderstanding and blindness about his identity and the nature of his mission. With their words and actions, both parties intend to put a stop to Jesus’ work.

**2.The Opinion of his Critics: *He’s an agent of Satan***

In verse 22 the focus of the narrative shifts from Jesus’ family to a delegation of religious scholars who voice some harsh criticisms about Jesus. Mark notes that this group came from Jerusalem, indicating that Jesus’ ministry in Galilee had caught the attention of the highest echelons of Judaism. This envoy was sent to Galilee to investigate Jesus and his ministry and to ascertain if he was a fraud and leading people astray. This was their assessment of Jesus:

“He is possessed by Satan (or Beelzebul)! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons” (Mark 3:22). Two separate but related accusations were being made here: Jesus was demon-possessed; and he cast out demons by the power of the prince of demons. Clearly, this was their spin on Jesus’ ministry. His critics could not deny the reality of his miracles, but they could invalidate them as signs of God’s kingdom by attributing their origins to Satan.

Jesus responded to their wild accusations with a few parables or analogies that exposed the illogical nature their claims. His counter argument boils down to this: If he were an agent of Satan in his ministry of miracles and exorcisms, then the evil one would be fighting against himself. When Jesus cast demons out of people, he was freeing them from demonic control. Why would Satan empower Jesus to destroy his rule? This would be like a kingdom divided by civil war or a family torn apart by feuding (Mark 3:24-25). Jesus drove his point home with this conclusion, “*if Satan is divided and fights against himself, how can he stand? He would never survive*” (Mark 3:26).

After exposing the fallacy of his critics’ claim of demonic collusion, Jesus uses further analogy to reveal the true meaning of his mission in the world. He was not working in agreement with Satan, but in opposition to him. To make this point, Jesus tells the story of a home invasion (Mark 3:27). If thief breaks into a guy’s house, especially a big, strong guy, and takes all his stuff, he’d first have to tie up the burly homeowner before making his getaway. Jesus’ mission, then, was to bind the strong man, namely Satan, and to plunder his goods, that is, to free people who were owned or controlled by the evil one. In establishing the kingdom or the rule of God, Jesus had to oppose the rule of Satan and to counteract his control of the world. His expulsion of demons exemplified a forceful attack on the lordship of Satan. The heart of Jesus’ mission was to confront the evil one and to defeat him on all fronts. This is still the case today as his kingdom work continues.

After clearly stating that his mission was to combat Satan, Jesus concluded his rebuttal by stressing the serious ramifications of his opponents’ claims. Their smear campaign was not only against him, but it was a slander against the true power behind his mission – the Holy Spirit. Their claim that Jesus was possessed by an unclean or an evil spirit represented a profound blindness and callousness that kept them from acknowledging the work of God in Christ by his Spirit. Eugene Peterson’s translation of Jesus’ words nicely captures the tone of this interchange: “*Listen to this carefully. I’m warning you. There’s nothing done or said that can’t be forgiven. But if you persist in your slanders against God’s Holy Spirit, you are repudiating the very One who forgives, sawing off the branch on which you’re sitting, severing by your own perversity all connection with the One who forgives*” (Mark 3:28-29, *The Message*). Jesus gave this stern warning because these critics were saying that he was controlled by not by God’s Spirit, but by an evil spirit.

**3. The Response of his Followers: *We sit at his feet***

After this heated exchange between Jesus and his critics, the story shifts back to his family, who have finally arrived at the house (Mark 3:31). It was previously stated that their purpose in coming was to seize Jesus and take him home to recuperate from his mental illness (Mark 3:21). So, they waited outside and sent a messenger inside to inform him of their arrival. The imagery here is quite striking. His biological family was on the *outside*, while his true family was on the *inside*, seated around him. The contrast between insiders and outsiders becomes even more pronounced with Jesus’ revolutionary pronouncement.

After the messenger delivered the news to Jesus that his mother and brothers were outside looking for him, he turned to the crowd and posed this rhetorical question, “*Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?*” (Mark 3:33). This, of course, led to his radical redefinition of family. Looking around the circle at the people who were seated at his feet, he boldly declared, “*Look, these are my mother and brothers. Anyone who does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother*” (Mark 3:34-35). In a culture in which your biological family defined who you were, this was a revolutionary statement. In stark contrast, Jesus’ true family was comprised of his disciples, those who were seated at his feet, listened to his words and learned from him. His true family was marked by obedience to the will of God.

So at the end of it all, each one of us must ask, *what is my response to Jesus?* Mark has placed these three responses to Jesus side-by-side in order to provoke a reaction. The call to follow Jesus and to be his disciple goes out to each one of us and we must respond. The cost of discipleship is great and the road is filled with challenges, temptations, and failures. Yet the path of discipleship brings a special fellowship with Christ himself. We are gathered into his presence and become members of his true family. Not only do we have a special bond with Jesus; we share a special bond with each other. Together in Christ we become a family of co-equal brothers and sisters, striving together to obey the will of God. You are my sisters and brothers. Your issues become my issues. Your sorrows become my sorrows. Your joys become my joys. Side-by-side we walk down the road, following the Master wherever he leads. May each one of us strive to follow him more closely and may each of us strive to help one another to stay on the path.