

Text: Mark 3: 20-35  
Title: A Family Reunion  
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I had a split personality when I was in high school.

At school I was a three-season athlete, chased girls, and tried to be cool. Remarkably mediocre in all three pursuits, what mattered was fun and friends and whatever flawed fantasy I was chasing. At school I was talkative and engaged; at home I was quiet, sullen, and withdrawn.

I had wonderful loving parents and I made their lives miserable. My mother remembers seeing me getting out of a friend's car laughing, talking, alive in the moment, but in the walk up to the house storm clouds and silence filled-in my face and I was a different person when I walked through the door. Broke my mother's heart.

I was one person when I was out.  
I was someone else when I was home.

I now know that while my experience may have been difficult, and clearly not fair to my parents, it wasn't unique. All sorts of us live with a public self and private self. All sorts of us know one experience away from home and a different experience at home. A fully integrated self is not easy to come by....

Which brings us to Jesus.

We have very little information about the family life of Jesus. We know a good deal about his public life; we know a lot less about his private life. We know that as a child he slipped away from his folks and went to the temple, and we know that he went to a wedding with his mom. She was worried about the wine at the reception. But we don't know much more than that. There is very little about the home life of Jesus. There's very little about his relationship with his family.

We do know that his mother and brothers thought he was "out of his mind."

Our text reads that his family went looking for him, in order to bring him home, because they were worried about his mental well-being. The word here reads more literally that they thought Jesus was "standing outside" of himself.

As one scholar puts it:

*The idea is that someone has taken leave of his senses (or his senses have taken leave of him) and so what remains for the time being is a person whose emotions are unchecked and unregulated. This is the family's assessment of Jesus. Apparently, all Jesus' talk about invisible kingdoms of God and the casting out of demons led members of his own family to the conclusion that Jesus was seeing things that no one else could see and the reason was simple: he was out of his ever-loving mind!*

My parents sent me to a therapist; Jesus' parents wanted to bring him home – to rest, to tamp down the crazy talk, to temper the demon stuff, to stop making such a spectacle that he was drawing crowds. He was an embarrassment. What would the neighbors say?

I guess we should cut Jesus' family some slack. There's no map for how to parent the Son of God. And they weren't alone, the religious leaders of the day traveled about 80 miles to voice their concerns. They weren't worried about Jesus' mental health; they were worried about his spiritual balance. They thought he was a tool of Satan. They thought he was possessed by demons....

By the way, it is worth noting that their diagnosis, that Jesus was a satanic agent and not a divine one, acknowledges that there was some power at work in Jesus. They recognize that he was no charlatan or illusionist, but they decide that his power is a threat. And, they offer the most damning assessment they can.

He's of Beelzebul.  
He's not of Jehovah.

Now. The literary structure of our text points to the response of Jesus as the heart of the passage. This is the meat of the sandwich. This is Mark asserting that what really matters is that Jesus has power over Satan, over evil, over all things. Jesus binds up the strong man and plunders his house. And this claim about the power of Jesus comes just three short chapters after Jesus has announced the coming of the kingdom,  
driven out evil spirits,  
healed the diseased and the demon possessed,  
cured the leper and the paralytic.

This is the heart of Mark's gospel.  
Matt Skinner summarizes it this way:

*The parable may be taken as Jesus' mission statement in Mark, urging us to interpret the rest of the narrative guided by this image. The whole Gospel is a story about the reign of God coming to displace another reign, and that other one will not relinquish its power without a fight.*

That is an astonishing claim.  
And it's great news!  
Because....

Whatever struggle you're in. Whatever powers of evil seem to hold the upper hand. Whatever your battle with addiction, or depression, or greed, or indifference, or cancer, or racism, or injustice, or death... ultimately Jesus will win. The reign of God is coming. So, while there will be a struggle, while there will be times when it feels like all is lost, finally the way and rule of this world will be overpowered, bound up, and defeated. Thanks be to God!

But, let's go back to Jesus' family.

Jesus is inside a crowded house when his mother and brothers show up. The best they can do is get word to him that they're waiting outside - hoping for a meaningful family reunion. But, in response Jesus looks around at those seated with him and says,

*Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does God's will...*

Imagine the disappointment that your son doesn't set aside his public voice to affirm his place in your family. He elevates the kingdom of God over the flesh and blood of family. Another mother's heart broken.

My father was a college history professor. He lived at the intersection of faith and scholarship. There seemed to be no boundaries to either his conviction that all things were under the lordship of Jesus Christ or to his curiosity about how that reality might be lived out.

Those commitments led him to read and think deeply about the ways that Christians have approached war, military service, and in particular nuclear weaponry. And in the early 1980s that work led to a trip to the Soviet Union to meet with Russian Christians who were asking the same questions. (This is during the height of the Cold War, in the midst of the nuclear arms race.)

I was more fully integrated at home and in public by the early 80s, but I still paid little attention to my dad's trip. However, the best photograph that I have of my father was taken while he was in Russia and I remember one thing that he told me on his return...

He tried to learn Russian before he went in order to communicate better if opportunity arose for connection outside of the state approved channels. I think learning the language proved unwieldy, but I remember on his return he said that he felt a kinship to the Russian Christians that he met and with whom he worshipped. He said it was a kinship that superseded state and national commitments. He said that he was closer to them than to those who worshipped the idolatry of military might.

The world is a complicated place....

Dear friends, as Jesus defeats evil and death in this world, and as the way and will of God is ultimately victorious, then our primary allegiance is (in fact) not to nation-state or family, but to Jesus and the kingdom of God.

I know that flies in the face of how we love our kids and our country, but that's the claim of scripture. I know that we fall far short in our pursuit of that high calling, but that's the claim of Jesus. I know that in contemporary Christian culture the place of the family takes center stage, but that's the claim of the gospels.

As you belong to Jesus you belong to the Kingdom of God.  
As you belong to Jesus you belong to family of God in Christ.

And, this morning we baptized adorable little Nolan Gus into that family; and we ordain new elders and deacons to help lead that family as it finds expression here at Hope.

Maybe for us the call is to integration – to be fully ourselves in our family lives and in our life together. How do we seek after and live into the will of God? How do we do that in this culture, with these frameworks for family, with the dynamics of political discourse, with issues of race and sexuality, with the trappings of wealth and power? How do we live into the reign of God with joy and hope and sacrifice?

*Then he looked at those seated in a circle around him and said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does God’s will is my brother and sister and mother.”*

Amen.