

Year B, Pentecost 2

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Mark 3:20-35,

Tying Up the Strong Man

“The crowd came together again, so close they could not even eat.” Not even eat! I don’t like big crowds too densely packed. They frighten me and I look for a spot that has some withdrawal room. There is something menacing about people packed together so tightly they can’t even eat.

Jesus’ family had gotten word of it too and they were frightened for Jesus. The text says “When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, ‘He has gone out of his mind.’” People were saying Jesus is mentally ill and acting out. That’s a dangerous combination.

Were the crowds gathered to watch a show; were they looking for someone to throw out of their community, someone they saw as dangerously different, maybe crazy, so that they could form unity among themselves by expelling the one they all agreed was a threat? The crowd could turn into a mob and turn on Jesus at any moment. This was like reality TV and the audience gathers to see what is going to happen.

Already he has attracted the legal experts from Jerusalem who over and over say, “He’s possessed by Beelzebub. He throws out demons with the authority of the ruler of demons.” They should be calming the crowd down like good policemen but they further agitate the people pumping them full of self-righteous venom that could explode into violence against this lone man who stands out.

He is surrounded, alone and vulnerable. Any person who has been alone in a crowd on the verge of turning destructive knows the fear of Jesus’ situation. Many high schoolers live in fear the rest of the school will turn on them and so they alter their behavior by wearing the right cloths, doing the right things and thinking the right thoughts so as to minimize any possibility of being caught at the wrong end of the accusing finger.

Jesus calls the legal experts to him and presents a riddle. Jesus knows direct logic will not get through. They are beyond that. He asks “How can Satan cast out Satan? If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand. And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand. And if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his end has come.” Before being exposed to Girardian thinking I had always assumed it was

a rhetorical question and the answer was obvious. If Satan casts out Satan he destroys himself and so this is why Jesus can't be in league with Satan.

But through these last 20 years I have come to see that Satan casts out Satan all the time. In the New Testament, Satan is the accuser. He is not a person; he is an anthropological mechanism that humans use to keep the peace or at least try to. This peace never last for long. Actually, we are our own Satan and this is how the satanic mechanism works. We whisper to ourselves and say "I am good, and he is evil. We must get rid of him to make the world safe."

When Jesus' family heard that people were saying "He has gone out of his mind" they were very concerned that people would form unity among themselves by turning on Jesus and destroying him. This is the danger of the too-close crowd who can turn into a mob bent on destroying Jesus at the drop of a hat. This is why the family wanted to get him out of there. They knew what every teenager knows. You don't want to get caught being different in a turbulent crowd who does not know itself and may turn on you to find a common identity as your enemy.

It's the method for finding unity that civilization has used since civilization began. Rather than all being in rivalry with all, spontaneously the crowd will turn on one and unit against him. Since all agree that he is the problem, his elimination brings an awesome sense of peace and unity. Yah, yah, the wicked witch is dead.

Satan, mimetic rivalry personified, stirs everyone up. For example, the young men strut and the young women flirt each in competition with their own gender. As the drum beat rives up, the situation threatens to go out of control and the police are called. To keep things from spilling into total violence they threaten violence. To protect ourselves from "the bad violence of a mob" they call in the "good violence" of law enforcement and the military. This is Satan casting out Satan, violence casting out violence, and we are all caught in it.

This is why we have armies and wars, policeman, court systems and prisons. This is how the world works and without it, our world would be much worse. Satan, that rivalrous impulse within, stirs us to desire what we think the other has and Satan also stirs us to set up systems of violence to protect us from other people taking what we already have. Violence casting out violence—a kingdom that works by being divided against itself.

This violence on both sides is the strong man who controls the world. He is the one Jesus must bind before any can escape. We are the plunder Jesus wants to steal from the strong man's house.

The gospels were written to show us how Jesus entered the strong man's house and bound him. With an explosion of violence known as the crucifixion everyone thought they were getting rid of evil. They didn't know that violence was the evil being exposed.

Notice Jesus didn't kill the strong man, he tied him up! With him tied, Jesus pulls us out of Satan's house, out of the strong man's way of doing things. The house is still there but we have escaped whereas before it was impossible! Who would have thought vulnerability and forgiveness would bind so strong an adversary?

The way he ties the strong man is almost beyond imagination! He allows the strong man to point his accusing finger at him and condemn him to death, but after three days, God vindicates him by raising him up. Jesus ties up the strong man by going to the cross and forgiving those who put him there. Jesus' binding power over the strong man works through suffering and forgiveness rather than confrontation and violence.

Jesus shifts his focus. He begins, "I assure you that human beings will be forgiven for everything, for all sins and insults of every kind." It's a flat and comprehensive pronouncement of forgiveness directed to all human beings.

He goes on, "But whoever insults the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. That person is guilty of a sin with consequences that last forever." This verse has been a source of anxiety for millions who wonder if they have sinned against the Holy Spirit and condemned themselves for eternity. But notice the preceding verse says all are forgiven. To be consistent this statement can't refer to human beings. It refers to Satan, the strong man, who isn't a person at all but an anthropological mechanism. With Jesus' coming, this mechanism has been exposed and condemned eternally.

At this point Jesus' family arrives. They stand outside and pass the word in to have Jesus come out. The disciples inside surround Jesus and listen to him. There is no accusing finger here.

We live in a world full of accusation and too little love; nation against nation, politician against politician, brother against sister. The courts are full and we buy insurance to protect ourselves. Jesus sits among those who find him life-giving. No accusation disturbs their peace and all look to Jesus as their model. He tells them accusation is done for; tied up and defeated by self-giving sacrificial love. He asks all of us to become God's family by living God's non-accusing and powerfully forgiving love in the world. When we do, he says we are his brothers and sisters. We can join him the strong man has been tied up. Amen.