



“Holy Madness”

Scripture – Mark 3:19b-35

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Randall Clayton

Sunday, June 9, 2024

This past week I went south to see that circle of people related to me by birth or marriage...my family. It was an opportunity to reconnect with my siblings, to meet two new members of my family circle, specifically my niece’s new spouse and a young child born since I’ve been there. Along the way to our final destination in South Carolina, we stopped in a couple of cemeteries in the mountains of North Carolina to find the graves of long-gone relatives in the cemetery of the Presbyterian church that my forebears helped to found and gave the land for in Mills River North Carolina. Once at my brother’s home outside of Clemson, my siblings and I spent many hours sorting and dividing my mother’s belongings which had been packed away since before her death several years ago, and then spent a couple of days going through piles of old family photographs. As we did, we retold stories we had heard – rehearsing the family folklore:

“You’ve got to eat a peck of dirt before you die,” Granny Brittain was fond of saying.

“The sugar is no longer sweet,” proclaimed the great grandfather.

“The best horses ever – Mary and Bess,” my grandfather often noted.

“Life begins at 40” my mother was fond of remarking.

In the days we were together, my brother, sister and I recalled things like a long family camping trip, the houses we grew up in, the pets who shared our childhood and household. We remembered the people and events that had shaped us and the ties that bind us even though we live far from one another. And all of that got me to thinking about the notion of family. Those who are my age and older may remember a television program that ran for a number of seasons called *The Waltons*. Set in Virginia during the Great Depression and World War II, the Waltons were a loving, close-knit family. Grandma and Grandpa lived with Mr. and Mrs. Walton and their seven children. As each episode ended, the camera shows the front of the old wooden home, and we’d hear each person inside bid “goodnight” to everyone else as the lights went off in their rooms. That program depicted one concept of family – several generations of people related by marriage and birth; it was a family circle that was tight and caring, and life giving.

Fast forward several decades, and there is another television series, *Modern Family*, which depicted another type of family constellation in a different era. Set in Los Angeles, the extended Dunfy family on

this program included a so called “traditional” family of mother, father and children, a blended family of husband, wife, and child from wife’s first marriage, and a same sex couple with their young child. It’s not the Waltons for sure, but when the chips were down, the Dunfy’s rallied around each other, and in the end, were always there for each other. Family.

But I believe the circle called “family” may even be broader. I think about a recent Hulu series, *Only Murders in the Building*. In the beginning, the three main characters – Charles Haden Savage, Oliver Putnam, and Mabel Mora – are complete strangers whose only tie to each other is living in the same New York City apartment building. A happen-chance meeting in an elevator coupled with a murder in their building draws them together, and before long, these three people who have no relationship by either blood, or marriage, become a family. A family of choice. Sharing a common interest and a common desire to solve a murder, they get to know one another, start to care about each other, support one another through life’s trials, and challenge each other. They are *not* family by blood or marriage, but surely, they are family, nonetheless.

The scripture text I read a few minutes ago takes us back in time to Jesus and his family. Although we don’t know a lot about it, we do know that Jesus had a mother and sisters and brother. And we also know that in his day families were defined by marriage and birth, not friendships. Furthermore, in his day, family was extremely important. Your family determined your social status, your economic status, your educational status, too. Your family provided income for food and housing and was your security in your old age. According to the values of Jesus’ society, the family was accorded the highest honor in one’s life. But in Jesus’ day, as in ours, sometimes our families—those who have known us the longest—don’t always really understand us, do they? Such was the case with Jesus.

By the time Jesus returned home after some travels, he had developed a reputation – a reputation for inviting men to leave their families behind and follow him when society said don’t leave your family; he had developed a reputation for healing on the sabbath, a day not meant for healing if it could be put off until another day; he had developed a reputation for saying things about loving and forgiving beyond measure and welcoming those that polite society did not. And these things surely led some to believe he was crazy, off his rocker, deranged, mad, out of his mind. Seeing what he was doing, and knowing what he was saying, he likely embarrassed his family, or perhaps terrified that his crazy ideas would get him into trouble, perhaps even killed. And so, when Jesus got home, not understanding who he was or what he was doing, fearing he was crazy, his family intended to restrain him before he got hurt or before the family’s position in the community was completely torched. To their way of thinking, better a restrained Jesus, than a crazy Jesus walking the streets.

But it wasn’t only his family who didn’t understand Jesus. It was also the leadership of his own religious tradition. And so those leaders sent some really high-ranking scribes all the way from Jerusalem who made the claim that Jesus wasn’t so much crazy as he was really the devil incarnate. In response, Jesus pointed out that if he was really Satan and doing things like healing people which were clearly not satanic actions, that would mean that Satan would be divided; and a divided house cannot stand. Just as a church divided by conflict will atrophy and move toward death, and just as a family wrenched apart by the inability to forgive one another or to accept forgiveness will find the threads frayed to the breaking point, so too, if Jesus was of evil, he said, doing what he was doing would mean that evil’s house would not stand for very long either.

And then Jesus told them a parable. Jesus likened himself to a home invader who has broken into a strongman's house (read: Satan's house), tied him up and plundered it already. Already, Jesus suggested, he had destroyed the power of evil. Already he has set us free to love and serve and live. Jesus then suggested that anyone claiming that Jesus' actions are evil have put themselves outside of the possibility of a relationship with God. I mean, if actions such as healing the world's hurts, welcoming the refugee, offering dignity to those who have none – things that are certainly biblical expectations – if such actions are declared to be evil, then that person has placed themselves outside of God's community, outside of God's desires. That day, when he heard that his mother and sisters and brothers were outside waiting to see him, Jesus didn't invite them to join him inside as would have been in accord with traditional family values of the day. Likewise, he did not go outside to see them as perhaps a son would have been expected to do. Instead, he threw traditional family values out of the window and said that it wasn't marriage or genetics that makes someone his family. Rather, Jesus said his family are those who do the will of God, a concept which probably sounded pretty crazy to those who were listening to him that day; a concept that perhaps even sounds a tad bit mad today.

Reflecting on this text, theologian Thomas Troeger wrote¹

If Christ is charged with madness, it's madness that's divine,
a visionary gladness this world cannot confine,
the madness of conceiving what no one else can see,
then acting and believing so it will come to be.

Thus, when Christ seized and plundered the demons' dark domain,
his friends and foes both wondered if he were not insane.
They charged his soul was riven, his heart and mind possessed
by forces he had driven from those who were distressed.

Christ spoke to all this ranting, a vivid, lucid word
a parable supplanting the charges he had heard.
"A house that is divided, a kingdom, soul or land
with raging wars inside it cannot survive and stand."

Despite his deft explaining, Christ still appeared distraught
to guardians [who] maintain accepted bounds of thought.
The force of faith in action seems madness to each age
and often the reaction is fear disguised as rage.

We live in a world where we quickly take sides, where we are told that might makes right, where we divide and conquer to gain power or maintain it, and where we have come to believe that freedom simply means freedom from rules and obligations rather than freedom for others. We live in a world where we tend to hang out with those who look and act just like us, and increasingly seem to distrust and dislike and discount anyone who is different. We tend to draw the family circle very tight – but that's not the circle Jesus draws.

¹ Thomas H. Troeger, "Homiletical Perspective" in *Feasting on the Gospels: Mark*, Cynthia Jarvis and Elizabeth Johnson editors, Westminster John Knox Press, 2014, page 103.

By Jesus' definition, our family circle is much, much larger. It includes republicans, democrats, libertarians, and undecideds. In fact, any who are trying to love like Jesus are our kin, Jesus said. By Jesus' definition, our family includes those who are heartsick and horrified by what Israel has done in Gaza, as well as those who are convinced Israel's actions are right. Perhaps it seems a little crazy, but our family includes people we didn't choose to be related to, and maybe don't really want to be related to...people who may look different, act different, worship differently or even love differently than we do; anyone, Jesus said, who is trying to love like Jesus loved and serve like Jesus served is part of our family circle.

Maybe it seems crazy that the circle called family is so much bigger than we sometimes assume, but maybe that's no crazier than his call that we use our gifts and skills and love to bring healing to a hurting world as Jesus did; maybe it's no crazier than the command to his followers to love like Jesus and to share his love liberally with the world around us; no crazier to turn the other cheek instead of seeking retribution; no crazier than the call to forgive without limits, or to feed the hungry; no crazier than the concept that if we want to save our lives we must lose them for the sake of the Gospel.

Yes, it all might sound crazy, and maybe it is, but it's wonderful, holy madness to be sure. Holy madness...that the Gospel truth is that we are loved and valued in God's sight; holy madness that God so loves us and values each of us that goes to extreme lengths to make sure all of us have life and hope. Holy madness!

As Troeger wrote:

Despite his deft explaining, Christ still appeared distraught to guardians [who] maintain accepted bounds of thought. The force of faith in action seems madness to each age and often the reaction is fear disguised as rage.²

And he concludes his poem with these words:

Yet earth needs heaven's madness to seize with grace and bind the guilt, the hurt, the sadness, the fear and hate that blind.

Intrude, O Christ, impassioned with madness that's divine, upon the world we've fashioned and give it your design.³

May we draw the circle wide and wider still with our love, service and welcome. And may the circle be unbroken!³

Prayers of the People ~ Janet Steinwedel

Let's unite our hearts and minds in prayer.

Ever present Mystery, Creator, Source of all blessings...

We quiet ourselves here and now to be prompted by your Spirit.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

We are so grateful for springtime which pulls us out of the doldrums of winter – physically and metaphorically. Thank you for wonder and awe of the natural world which refreshes our spirits.

The bright sun and long days are a balm to the soul...and we've been in great need of healing.

The daily stories of warring countries, all manner of divisions – so much death and destruction, and reckless dictators stoking the fires of hatred, wear us to a frazzle.

Holy Spirit, infuse the right values in our hearts. Let us remember that we are not in control. Help us to be still and to listen generously for your leading in our lives. When we carve out a little space within for your Presence, we enable peace in our hearts, and possibility for meaningful, purposeful days.

In this space we can unleash our best creative selves and serve you in ways that benefit all.

We are so grateful for this Westminster community that encourages our gifts and talents be used in so many joy-filled ways. Help us each to find our place to contribute and belong.

And, loving God, bless our graduates who have toiled and challenged themselves over many years. Provide them loving guidance for the next steps on their journeys. Give teachers the rest they need and so deserve after another year of patiently providing knowledge and wisdom to the students in their care.

Support this congregation in being an open, safe, warm place, for all who wish to find or stretch themselves on their spiritual journey. In this Pride month, let us be as Diana Butler Bass reminds us, “a community of human solidarity and service.” Let us be a support to each person on their path to wholeness.

Help us to make contact through our presence with those in our neighborhood seeking a spiritual home. And guide us in making our homes places of loving kindness and peace so that our children, and our children's children, and all who enter in are met with that solace.

Lord, let us not fall prey to scheduling every minute of every day, or get too far ahead of ourselves in our plans, or lose ourselves to tireless detail in every moment, but enable us to connect to the essence of our Being, and commit to faith expressing itself through love...so that we might act in ways that align with your hopes and dreams for us. You gave us Jesus—a Friend, our Teacher, Savior, Lord, Way, and Presence—a model of love, if nothing else, and in place of everything else, help us to choose love—to take it upon ourselves to be more loving each day.

Remind us of the wisdom at our disposals if we but take the time to pause, and reflect. Give us the patience to forgive one another for past mistakes. Strengthen us in community, ground us in faith and help us to see that we have all we need to flourish and live honorably.

Let us pray in the words given to us: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.**