Karen Hollis

Sermon

Mark 3:20-35

June 10, 2018

I was watching Northern Exposure the other day from a disc I got at the library. If you’ve never checked out their dvd section, you might be surprised at the treasures to be found there. In this episode of Northern Exposure, the devil comes to Sicily, AK, in the form of a door-to-door salesman, traveling with a goat. Anyone who has watched the show will know Sicily, AK as a place where odd and awe-inspiring things happen on a pretty regular basis, and are usually connected with some kind of life lesson or opportunity for growth. So, the devil shows up in town – of course, it’s Northern Exposure – and he gets himself invited to the women’s group where he can pitch his products. During his presentation he zeros in on Shelly, the young waitress, often portrayed as innocent and naïve. In the course of their interactions, the devil tells Shelly she can have her dreams come true if she burns the disgusting old bathrobe she wishes her significant other would throw out. If she betrays her partner’s trust, she will get the thing she wants the most. Tempting, you are, Mr. Devil. You help us to do the thing we don’t want to do . . . but really kind of do want to do. Perhaps you are the voice that says, just do it, no one will know; don’t go for a walk, just stay on the couch, it’s super cozy here; or of course you’re justified in doing that; perhaps you are the one who scoffs at consequences and works to keep us in a state of misery. “Why me?” Shelly asks after refusing to go through with it. “If I can get someone like you, so pure in heart to stray over that white line, just a little bit, [it’s a thrill].”

The devil with a one-track mind, stays focused the steadfast on his purpose of opposing the compassionate and reconciling love of God. The idea of an actual devil or Satan, as this morning’s scripture says, is pretty foreign to us today, but when Jesus uses this as an example, he is referring to something he believes to be truly at work, perhaps not a being with horns, but a real power actively engaged in the world.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Jesus has been out doing ministry, healing people, getting the attention of the authorities, calling the 12 apostles. He’s getting some momentum going and people are beginning to respond to the kingdom. Mark’s Jesus is in a hurry; he doesn’t have a lot of time to bring people along, so while many experience his healing and give thanks for it, others probably experiences his teaching as a fire hose. Now they’re all wet and bruised and are so bent out of shape that they don’t even realize the sun is shining to dry them off . . . so they call him crazy. The scribes who have come from Jerusalem get on board with trying to provoke Jesus by saying something really stupid. Jesus has been casting out demons publically, so they say, ‘you’re possessed by the ruler of all demons, by whom you are casting out demons.’

Jesus is thinking – what are you even talking about? That doesn’t even make sense; it doesn’t follow logic, so Jesus takes us on this kind of proof of why they don’t make any sense and should at least put a little more effort into distracting Jesus from his purpose in the world. It goes like this:

How can Satan cast out Satan? Satan wants Satan to be in places to do harm, so removing Satan from somewhere makes Satan weaker. And using energy to remove one’s self from somewhere distracts from the overall purpose and again just weakens him.

Jesus goes on to say, a kingdom or house divided against itself will not be able to stand. We all know that internal conflict can cause real problems and real pain. Individual internal conflict can cause chaos within us and around us as we try to sort through the issue. Internal conflict in organizations or businesses or families or communities often results in some kind of change as the issue is resolved. Change is very bad for Satan because Satan is about 1 thing and any deviation from that would make him not so much like Satan. So if Satan rises up against himself and finds himself on the verge of change, indeed his end has come.

And finally Jesus observes that Satan rising up against Satan is kind of like going into the strong person’s house and tying them up so you can steal all their things. Satan loses power and cannot fight against an intruder if he’s busy fighting against himself. So you see, it’s impossible for Jesus to be demon possessed, but either way, Satan’s in trouble.

It’s a bit ironic that the ones who are suggesting Jesus is under the influence of darkness seem to also be among those opposing the kingdom he brings and the life he restores in people. And it’s not only the scribes who are a problem for Jesus on this day. His own family has come to bring him home so he will stop all this nonsense. People are talking about him, calling him crazy. Will he ever cease to embarrass us? Or worse, what if he gets hurt? The tensions in the family are very high and the stakes are higher – the family wouldn’t be here if they weren’t. Most of us don’t live in the same home with multiple generations of our family – some of us are lucky enough to live next door to family or on the same island, others might even have parents or kids living with them – but multiple generations under one roof is rare. In Jewish life during this time, the family is the God-given fabric of thinking and living. Being outside the family is just unheard of; how would one live? How would one function outside the family? So when Jesus calls those sitting around him his mother and brothers, he is calling out his family as ones who oppose the Kingdom of God. In the same breath he makes a shocking statement about a new kind of family that is more meaningful than the biological family, and is blessed by God. Jesus’ family hasn’t ever really understood him. When Jesus was 12 years old his parents left Jerusalem after the festival, assuming he was somewhere with them in the caravan. When they discovered he wasn’t with them, they found Jesus back in the Jerusalem temple, teaching people and answering questions. They didn’t understand then and they don’t understand now that this is who he is and he will not be constrained.

His family is divided, but perhaps on the verge of change, because in the end, Jesus’ brothers were close followers of Jesus, and his mother was well involved in the ministry at the end of Jesus’ life.

In these stories of scripture there are several layers of intention and meaning woven together. The author of this gospel, known as Mark, writes this story to a Christian community in the first century CE who are being heavily persecuted by the Romans, so while he aims to express in his writing who Jesus was, he also wants to assure the people that those who persecute do not find favour with God, so he writes, “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.” Mark is using the context of this story of Jesus being persecuted to give a message of hope to people being persecuted in real time for their belief in Jesus. It’s easy to hear this message as a hard line consequence of turning from God, but it is mitigated when you take into account who Mark is writing to, and the larger message of God’s love and reconciliation in the gospels. Context is everything.

I stand in awe of Jesus’ resolve to bring the Kingdom and never be distracted or dissuaded; he never once seems knocked off his game. He just responds as if it is nothing. There is nothing divided or broken or confused or possessed about Jesus. He is grounded and clear and focused on the Kingdom of God. If a kingdom divided cannot stand, then the Kingdom of God, clear in purpose and rich in love and reconciliation is sure to cut through the darkness and bring this strong message of hope to the corners of the world. Thanks be to God!

1. Feasting on the Word, Year B vol. 3, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)