

Second Sunday after Pentecost – Year B – Proper 5 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony 6.6.21

It isn't often that I begin a sermon with an explanation of the literal meaning of a phrase. Today I'm going to do that. The Greek phrase that is translated as "has gone out of his mind" has gone insane, literally means "has stood outside". Hold that meaning in mind as we explore this part of the Gospel of Mark.

This gospel was written some forty years after the Resurrection and is scholars believe the earliest gospel that we have. It is thought to have been written in Rome for a largely Gentile audience. The church was in those days not what we imagine when we think of church. In the earliest days the followers of Jesus were called the People of the Way. That is a more accurate description. There were no buildings with steeples, crosses and altars. People often met in homes, in secret to share Eucharist. Large numbers were converted by the preaching of Peter, Paul and others. The People of the Way were viewed as a threat on two sides.

The Romans were threatened because the newly baptized Christians refused to offer worship to the Roman gods. Such refusal was treason as it was seen as incurring the displeasure of those gods and thus undermining the security of the State. The Jewish religious authorities were threatened because the followers of the Way were seen as blasphemers standing in the way of God and the restoration of the Jewish state. The Jewish authorities were not bad people, only people who were committed to the wrong thing. They were committed to maintaining domestic and religious life as they knew it, life that seemed to them to be what God was asking of them. Quite literally the Christians "stood outside".

No one I think would deny that we live in troubled times. In these troubled times like those first century in which Mark wrote, we are simply trying our best to figure out how to be faithful. Living faithfully in difficult situations has the challenge and blessing for Christians. It is a challenge because living faithfully often causes us to "stand outside" the world around us. Sometimes, we are thought to be just a little bit insane. Living faithfully in troubled times is also a blessing because we discover that we are not alone. God, the Holy Spirit sustains and supports us. It is this sustaining support that gets us through the hard times.

Scripture, the inspired word of God, has for us at least three levels of meaning. The first is the level of "historical fact". None of the Gospel writers were particularly interested in recording what happened in the way we think of history. They were interested in telling a story that would convey to others the truth of what God had done and how the world had radically changed. The core message was that Jesus, the Son of God, had come as a fully human person, had lived, taught, died and had been resurrected. All the rest was "commentary". The story was designed to capture the attention and then the heart of those who heard it.

The second level of meaning was to make relevant the events of Jesus life to the people living in the Roman world, some 40 years after the Resurrection. Parts of the story, and the way in which the story was framed was designed to convert the hearers to this new way of life to which God seemed to be calling them.

The third level of meaning is for us the most important. What does the work of God revealed in the Gospels tell us of God's continued work in the world? In our reading this morning Mark tells a story about an event in the life of Jesus. What does that story tell us about the continued work of God in the world in which we live?

Jesus family, his mother and siblings come to take him home because they are worried about him. They can see that he is challenging both the Roman political authority and the Jewish religious authority. Their conclusion is that Jesus their son and brother must be insane. When

told that his family has arrived, Jesus answers that those who follow him, those sitting around him are his new family. "Here are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Consider who it was that was sitting around Jesus. They were not the powerful or the socially acceptable. They were the poor, the demented, the sick, and the powerless and women. They were Jew and Gentile alike. Jesus welcomed everyone, those who stood outside and those who were within the new circle of the Kingdom of God that he proclaimed. The privileged were welcomed as well as those who were poor. No one is entitled to go to the head of the line in this kingdom, all are equally beloved of God. That fact is what made the Christians stand outside. When we live into that truth today, we too stand outside most of our culture.

A second message of this gospel concerns discernment. How do we know what is of the Holy Spirit and what is not? This Holy Spirit that we speak of is described as wild, untamed and disturbing coming in unpredictable and unexpected ways. The will of God that comes to us through the Holy Spirit is rarely convenient, but always exciting. The difficult question is "what if we get it wrong"? What if what we think is the Holy Spirit directing us, is not the Spirit at all? These are formidable fears which can paralyze us. What is the answer that Mark gives?

It was healing that drew people to Jesus, and healing that was the core of the ministry. Healing can take many forms, physical, social, psychological or relational. However, true healing starts with compassion. Compassion is born when we recognize that everyone is a the beloved child of God. Compassion comes when we are willing to put the needs of others before or at least on a par with our own. At its root, Jesus was calling all humanity to love one another as God loves us all. Love, compassion, healing these are the marks of the will of God. To love, to be compassionate and to heal how we can recognize the sign of the Holy Spirit calling to us.

Living a life of love, compassion and healing will ensure that we are not guilty of blaspheming against the Holy Spirit, the unforgivable sin. Why unforgivable? Because when we deny the reality of the power of the Spirit in our lives, when we deny the existence of God at all, we choose to stand outside, where God's love cannot reach us. And where God's love cannot reach, there can be no forgiveness.

And so, three questions and an answer from Gospel of Mark today. Who is our family? How do we know it is the Holy Spirit in our lives, what is the unforgiveable sin? The answer is love, compassion and healing, for us and for those who surround us whoever they may be. And what is the unforgivable sin? The only unforgivable sin is to put ourselves intentionally beyond the reach of God's love and the power of the Holy Spirit.