

Yr. B, Proper 5
June 10, 2018
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1411 Words

Lessons: Genesis 3:8-15
Psalm 130
2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1
Mark 3:20-35

The story of Jesus' family going out to restrain him opens a door most of us would like to keep shut. Families who have struggled with mental illness want to keep that door shut. People who have struggled with emotional trauma or strife want to keep that door closed tight. We do not want to hear a story—especially this week—that reminds us of painful realities or painful memories. Certainly, we don't want to hear that story in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but maybe we should.

Let me tell you, St. Mark is courageous for repeating this story. St. Mark is courageous for writing it down so that 2000 years later followers of Jesus like us will *still* have to grapple with this. Mark not only airs the dirty laundry, he puts the clothes line in the 'front yard'...in chapter 3! In the first two chapters, Jesus is beside the Sea of Galilee. In chapter three, he's beside *himself*. The Greek translation for 'gone out of his mind' means 'standing beside oneself...standing outside of oneself.'

Notice how the religious professionals are ready to pounce. The thing about some 'religious experts' that makes me sick, is how eagerly they pin labels on hurting people. In two thousand years, almost nothing has changed. The televised, well-coiffed 'experts of judgment' *still* love to spout words like 'heathen, demon, and Satan.' You can build quite a platform for personal aggrandizement on the basis of ridicule and fear. Just look around.

Meanwhile, Jesus has a simple question. "How can Satan cast out Satan?" he asks, pointing to the fruit of his own healing ministry among the poor, vulnerable, hurting, and hungry people of Galilee. One of the things I love about Jesus is how his actions speak louder than his words...*except* when he confronts the 'experts of judgment.'

He 'throws shade' at the scribes and Pharisees every single time! He pins down the *very people* who eagerly pin labels on the weak and hurting. Jesus puts down the very people who *look down* on everyone else.

If you want to find the Holy Spirit of God at work in someone, look for the *healer* of people who are sick, not the *labeler*...look for the person who blesses hurting people, not the one who judges them...look for the person who lifts up the oppressed, not the one who puts them down.

Today's Gospel story reveals plainly what the Holy Spirit looks like. It looks like Jesus...who lifts other people up. Today's Gospel story also reveals plainly what an *unclean* spirit looks like. It looks like 'experts of judgment' who use ridicule and fear; and put Jesus down in order to puff themselves up.

An ancient Near Eastern poet once told a tragic love story of a man and a woman. It is a *true* story, not in the sense that it can be historically documented to a particular day in a specific week of a certain year. No, it is true in the sense that poetry and parables *are true*. They help us stand *beside* ourselves...get *outside of ourselves* in order to see the truth.

This man and woman heard the sound of God. Let's pause right there. What does God sound like to *you*? Does God sound angry and judgmental? Does the sound of God make you afraid? Does the sound of God make you want ball up in a fetal position when you *already* feel down?

Then, please, listen again to the Holy Scriptures: “The man and the woman heard God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze.” There it is, the unassuming sound of God approaching as gentle as a breeze.

Dear people, check your hearing! The sound of God invites us to *live*...and *love*...abundantly. So, be sure you are listening to your Creator and Redeemer and Sustainer; not just some stubborn echo of the ‘experts of judgment’ who ridicule, judge, and promote fear of other people.

I am so proud to be part of a Church and a congregation that helps amplify the gentle sounds of God’s loving presence, and that rejects—like Jesus—the noisy, judgmental voices that are far too prevalent in our culture.

The writer continues the story. “The Lord God called to the man, and asked, ‘Where are you? ...Have you eaten from the tree?’” Let’s pause again. What does God know about *you*? Do you believe God has already put in ‘the fix’ and pre-determined your outcome? *Or* do you believe, like the ancient writer of Genesis, that we are truly free in each and every moment¹...to choose wisely or poorly, to bless or to curse, to build up or to blame.

Could it really be that God has chosen *not* to be a know-it-all, like the experts of judgment? Could it be that God has chosen to walk *beside us*—as quietly as an evening breeze—in a relationship that takes us and our freedom seriously?

Notice what happens next. The man blames the woman. (I know, right?) And then the woman blames the snake. Pause right there. Notice that they ate the forbidden fruit in order to become ‘know-it-all’s.’ What the man and the woman *became* were ‘experts of judgment,’ so effortlessly affixing blame on someone else, pinning labels on others. This is what ‘experts of judgment’ do best!

This story is such an important, fundamental story for us. It is the first moment we meet our God, who does *not know* all the answers. *And* we meet ourselves, pretending to know all the answers...and using that craftiness to cast blame.

Nowhere does the writer of Genesis say that the serpent was Satan. The Genesis story does not even say that the serpent was evil...only crafty. The best biblical scholars from the ancient, medieval, reformation-era, and modern Church have all affirmed this, and yet for some reason many Christians still assume this is a story about some supposed, insurmountable power of Satan over humans.²

What if—*instead*—we chose the more straightforward interpretation? What if we understood this story to be about our human desire to become ‘know-it-alls...experts of judgment...levelers of blame’?

Well, very little has changed. We still rush to judge one another, even though Jesus said “do not judge, and you will not *be judged*; do not condemn, and you will not *be condemned*.”³ Maybe we could practice what Jesus taught. Maybe we could be *less* judgmental, and *more* loving...like God is.

And, like Adam and Eve, we also continue demanding that God’s creation satisfy our every craving, even though Jesus said that “everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.”⁴ Maybe we could practice the kind of stewardship that Jesus taught. Maybe we could be *less* demanding and *more* unassuming...like God is.

¹ Bert Marshall emphasizes this point in his homiletical perspective essay in *Feasting on the Word, Yr. B, Vol. 3*, eds. David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Westminster John Know Press: Louisville, 2009), p. 101.

² David McCreery emphasizes this point in his exegetical perspective essay in *Feasting on the Word, Yr. B, Vol. 3*, eds. David Bartlett & Barbara Brown Taylor, (Westminster John Know Press: Louisville, 2009), p. 101.

³ Luke 6:37

⁴ Luke 12:48

Finally, we still blame—other people and even ourselves; even though Jesus taught that we are all valued by God⁵, and therefore valuable...even *made* in the image of God. So, maybe, we could practice the kind of acceptance of other people (and of ourselves) that Jesus taught. Maybe we could be *less* blaming, and *more* kind...like God is.

Dear people, Jesus has taught us *and shown us* how to live a more godly life. Remember this: He appeared—to all the thankful people who trusted his Holy Spirit—right there, beside the Sea of Galilee. At the *very same time* he appeared—to all the ‘experts of judgment’—to be beside *himself*...out of his mind.

We have come to believe that for us and for our salvation, Jesus came down from heaven. He appeared to some beside the sea while he appeared to others to be beside himself. Through it all, he lived, died, and rose again in order to be beside *us*...the whole, big, broken, blaming, human family.

I believe we can trust his godly way...and truth...and life. We can trust his relentless, crazy passion to show us how to live and love more like God—not as know-it-all’s, not as experts of judgment; but as a beloved family of God created for goodness’ sake to share the gifts of God as members of loving family *would do*.

I believe this is why Jesus concludes today’s Gospel story with these words: “Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

By God’s grace *we* have been adopted into just this kind of loving family. And we get to practice living up to this blessing every day.

Amen.

⁵ Matthew 6:26