

Third Sunday after Pentecost. — Proper 5B  
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**WHO ARE MY MOTHER AND MY BROTHERS?**  
by Lou Poulain, LLP

Today's gospel reading is relatively short — just fifteen verses. But

a lot happens in those few verses!

This gospel unit (there is a Greek word for a literary unit, “pericope”) ... this pericope has an interesting structure that the gospel writer we call Mark repeats number of times in his gospel. That structure is generally referred to as a “frame.” A frame is a passage in which the initial topic or story is interrupted, while something else seemingly unrelated transpires, then the original story concludes. It is a bit like a literary sandwich. In this structure, the two stories serve as points of interpretation for each other.

In this case the “sandwich bread” that frames the encounter between Jesus and the Scribes from Jerusalem, is that Jesus family, his “mother and brothers” have come to take him away because he is “out of his mind.” In the Greek, he is “beside himself.”

Then follows the dialogue between Jesus and the Scribes. At the conclusion of this literary unit we return to the family issue. Jesus is reminded that his family is waiting outside for him. And Jesus talks about family:

And looking at those who sat around him he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”

And that closing statement becomes an instrument for interpreting and applying the dialogue Jesus had with the Scribes.

Now, isolating and looking at Jesus' encounter with the Scribes, I think we have to start with that whole “Satan” issue..

Who will confess with me that the language of demons and devils, Beelzebul and Satan, makes you at least a bit uncomfortable?

Speaking for myself, I do not now believe, nor have I for a long time believed in the literal existence of demons, evil spirits, ghosts or goblins. But I know this. My

perspective is certainly a modern one, borne of our empiricist scientific era, where we understand microbes, as invisible to the naked eye as ghosts, are amongst the most powerful forces on earth.

Looking at the great expanse of human history, the abandonment of belief in malevolent spiritual beings is recent. But our forebears did believe. Early Christians, influenced by Greek philosophy, held a strongly dualistic view, seeing the world as divided in terms of contrast between the material world, and the spiritual; between good and evil. Lacking knowledge of modern science and medicine, stories of evil spirits, demons, served as explanations for the bad things that otherwise could only be seen as random chance.

So, how do Christians in our time, with a modern world view, reconcile the language of Scripture with how we see reality? And, is there some truth embedded in the language of Scripture that becomes increasingly inaccessible to us if we are locked into a literal interpretation or a literalist rejection of those words?

Acknowledging that problem, let's look at the dialogue, which consists of three sections:

- \* The Accusation by the Scribes from Jerusalem,
- \* Jesus' response in the form of parables, probably better called "riddles," and
- \* Jesus concluding statement about the sin that cannot be forgiven.

The Scribes start off with a slanderous accusation, that Jesus is possessed by Beelzebul, the "prince of the demons." The Scribes might even have altered the pronunciation of the name to render the meaning, "Lord of the Flies." Whichever, that was pretty nasty. They were clearly saying that Jesus' work of teaching and healing was at cross purposes with God's intention and Law (the Torah).

Looking at contemporary politics for comparison, we see clearly what the Scribes were up to. They were, simply, **name calling** in order to cast aspersions on Jesus. After enduring years of such nonsense, no doubt you are as sick of the current scurrilous style of politics as I am!

He was having none of it! Jesus turned the absurdity of their argument back on them with riddles exposing how fallacious and insincere they were. How can Satan cast out Satan? A house divided against itself cannot stand! (You might recall from history class that Abraham Lincoln famously used this text in his most important speech against the secessionists before the Civil War.)

Jesus concludes with a statement that has been subject to endless interpretations for two millennia:

"Truly I tell you 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" — for they had said, "He has an unclean spirit."

For me, as a pimply, earnest, naive, and a bit literalist young teenager, this was a cause of worry, and resulted in a long discussion with a priest in the confessional. He reassured me that no, I had not accidentally or inadvertently done something unforgivable. But that absolution did little to resolve for me the notion of any sin being ultimately beyond forgiving

All these years later I have come to believe that this was another instance to Jesus' use of hyperbole to drive home a point. Much like his famous "It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven." And I want to spend some time here on what Jesus was saying.

The commentary on the Gospel According to Mark found in The Interpreters' Bible, makes a powerful and to me compelling point. The "unforgivable" nature of this particular blasphemy is not theological, but rather psychological. It is not about God being unable to forgive. It is about the blasphemer being unable to repent, because that person's moral vision has become so blinded that they cannot see the blasphemy for what it is. The Scribes accuse Jesus of being held sway by the forces of evil in spite of the good effect of both his teaching and healing ministry. They literally observe the good, yet see it as evil both in origin and effect. It is a kind of moral obtuseness, and it is a theme that will re-emerge as the story reaches its climax at Jesus' arrest and trial in Jerusalem.

The commentary quotes John Milton's masterpiece, "Paradise Lost," published in 1667, an epic thousand line free verse poem about the fall of man, the story of Adam and Eve tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent. (Note, that the Genesis story in no way relates the serpent to Satan or the Devil, but that was a common medieval interpretation.)

Milton has Satan saying these fatal words: "Evil, be thou my good."

It is one thing to say that a person can be tempted to do something that their conscience identifies as being wrong, evil and sinful. It is quite another thing to say that a person's moral compass is so badly damaged that it points 180 degrees opposite, in which case the conscience is fatally damaged, and can no longer discern good from evil; and therefore can not, in a meaningful sense, repent.

In this world, again reflected in our politics, as well as in our economies, and social structures, we see mountains of evidence of how widespread is the lack of ability to discern the true good. Sometimes it is due to the allure of wealth, or power, sometimes it is perception filtered through the lens of racism, colonialism, classism, ageism.... ALL the ism's. Sadly, in our politics we have seen denial of the global climate crisis, and we have seen what can only be interpreted as intentional lying for the acquisition and maintenance of power.

We have also seen people speak out, take action and promote just policies and actions by our governments and corporations. We have, quite possibly involved ourselves through investment of our time, our money and our skills in the promotion of justice.

But can we know — REALLY KNOW - where we stand in this moral divide? Can we see clearly the good, and discern rightly good from evil? You might be like me, and live with the recognition that like me, you have at times experienced confusion and gotten sucked into the morass of conflict and rage that infects our times.

This is the saving grace. That distinction, that division between truth and falsehood, between the common good and naked self interest IS visible, isn't it? At least somewhat. And we have a yardstick, a means of measuring, of discerning. That yardstick is the Gospel of Jesus. Our willingness to be discomfited and challenged and moved to repentance and change is the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, shaping us into more moral and honest and self-giving persons, molding us, together and individually into the image of Christ.

Earlier, I spoke about Jesus identifying himself with those who hear his message and strive to do God's will, as his true family, his fundamental connection, and ours. I had said that the story of Jesus' families, both biological and chosen, would serve as a lens to interpret the story of Jesus' dialogue with the Scribes. And it becomes our application of the gospel message.

Praying here today, and always to be enlightened by the light of Christ, may we find ourselves joined together sitting around him, and hear Jesus say to *us*, "Here are my mother and my sisters and brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother."

Amen.