

The Crazy, Unclean Spirit of God

Mark 3:20-35

Heather Prince Doss

Sea Island Presbyterian Church

7 June 2015

The crowds were growing large and uncontrollable. People were talking. Has Jesus gone mad? His family is in a frenzy because of the stories they've heard. He's been feasting like a glutton (Mark 2:18). His friends are lowlifes and thieves; one of them will certainly betray him (Mark 2:15, 3:19). People possessed by demons call him the Son of God (Mark 3:11). Is he some kind of heretic or sorcerer? The temple leaders are aghast at Jesus' blatant disregard for even the most sacred customs. He keeps company with a bunch of degenerates, but he doesn't even keep the Sabbath (Mark 2:23-3:6). They finally come for him: his family, the religious leaders. It is time to put a stop to the madness. It is time to put Jesus back in his place, to remind him who he is and where he comes from. It is for his own good, after all.

They do come for Jesus, but one after another he rejects their accusations and then turns over the proverbial tables on them. The religious leaders charge him with heresy and blasphemy, but with a turn of logic Jesus insists that he cannot be the devil incarnate casting out the same. Then suddenly Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of blasphemy! These careful students of the law, these dutiful practitioners of religion have failed to see the Holy Spirit at work in and through Jesus. By denying that Jesus' work is Spirit work, they have denied and blasphemed against God.

Jesus' family comes, too. They take a more subtle approach, asking around where they might find Jesus. Maybe he will come speak to them and they can leave quietly, without a scene. Someone in the circle announces that Jesus' family is looking for him. But Jesus does not go speak to them. He barely acknowledges that they exist, let alone that they care for him. "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And then looking at the people sitting nearby, "You are my family. You and whoever does the will of God."

Why is it that Jesus' closest family – his mother and brothers – are so slow to understand who Jesus is and what he is all about? Why do the people who are supposed to know God the best – the scribes and Pharisees – have no sense that Jesus might actually be God incarnate? How do we make sense of the fact that Jesus' ministry brings him into conflict with what are otherwise the most stable and trusted institutions of his day: the family and the church? What does that mean for our own family values and religious traditions? Is the only way to be faithful to Jesus to be either crazy or heretical ourselves?

I have had a few opportunities over these past six weeks to dialogue with some of you about my decision to resign from position here at Sea Island and pursue a new call to work in an inner-city context. I wish I could have those sorts of one-on-one conversations with all of you. I think (I hope) you know already how much I love you and how much I have loved my work at Sea Island and in Beaufort. There are moments when, even to me, this decision seems strange or short-sighted: who in their right mind quits a perfectly good job without having another one lined up? Why would I leave behind a really lovely home, a strong network of friends and colleagues, a stable congregation, and the safety of this idyllic community for the dysfunction and danger of an inner city where the church seems to be dying and I know nobody? Am I a naïve romantic? Is it white, liberal guilt? Do I have a messiah complex? Am I just plain crazy?

My parents are here today. I don't think they have come to restrain me or put me back in my place. If they or anyone else has thought those things, they have been kind enough to keep their thoughts to themselves. In some ways, this decision could be seen as the logical culmination of my interests and experiences until now. Since an internship during my sophomore year in college I have felt great compassion toward the materially poor. During seminary, I served as a pastoral intern in an urban South African township. In the years after seminary I loved my work among homeless women in Washington, DC. Because of seven wonderful years here at Sea Island, I know a little bit about what it means to be a pastor. To any skeptics or detractors, I could argue that being a solo pastor in an inner city congregation is the logical next step.

But when it came down to it, this decision was not about logic. I sat at the center of the prayer labyrinth at Mo Ranch Conference Center in Texas. In my mind, I had been over the logic of a thousand possibilities a thousand times each. I was beginning to feel like I was going mad. So I sat there alone, praying for stillness in my racing thoughts. And then there it was, as warm and as comforting and as firm as two hands across my shoulders. "Remember who you are and where you come from. Remember that I love you." The Holy Spirit was there. This decision was not about logic. It was about Spirit – Holy Spirit coming to me with Pentecostal power that defies logic, convention, and tradition. Holy Spirit coming with Pentecostal power in such a way that to deny it would be nothing short of blasphemy.

Jesus received the Holy Spirit. It is practically the very first story of Mark's gospel. "In those days, Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him." When other might try to challenge Jesus' identity or status, he could always remember who he is and to whom he belongs with those words, as clear as a church bell on a Sunday morning: **YOU ARE MY BELOVED SON; WITH YOU I AM WELL PLEASED!**

The Jesus who confronts the scribes and Pharisees knows that true religion has nothing to do with adhering to customs or doctrines. It has only to do with recognizing and claiming the presence of the Holy Spirit, given by God. The Jesus who redefines family knows that Holy Spirit family has nothing to do with birth or status. It has only to do with belonging to God and doing God's will. Jesus does not hate the religious institutions of his day or ours, except where we refuse to recognize the Spirit of God moving and working – even against our most sacred customs. Jesus certainly does not hate his family nor ask us to hate ours. (On his deathbed he makes certain that his mother will be cared for (John 19:25-27)). But a Spirit-filled Jesus will not be bound by the family or religion of his birth. True family is found among those who do the will of God. True religion is found wherever the Holy Spirit is working. For those who are filled by the Holy Spirit, neither religious tradition nor family values can overpower this crazy, unconventional, life-giving force.

I do not know yet where I will land when I leave here in three months. I have no idea whether I will be “successful.” I am not even sure if I know what success looks like in the context to which I have been called. But what I know for myself and what I know for you is that we are Pentecost people, living with Holy Spirit power. Is it madness to feast and enjoy life when trouble and difficulty are brewing all around? Is it crazy to hang out with lowlifes and nobodies and friends who will betray us? Is it insane to work for a better world when all signs point to despair? I stand with Jesus and offer you a resounding, “No!” What is crazy is when Spirit-filled people like you and me try to bind the power of the Spirit by conforming to rules about what is appropriate and who is acceptable.

It is blasphemy to criticize the customs and teachings of the church when they hold us in a death-grip instead of bringing new life? Does it make us unclean to name the places and times when religion has been legalistic, judgmental, or power-hungry? Is it heretical to claim that Jesus might be bringing the kingdom of God to life through the power of science that seeks to heal the earth or political leaders who seek justice for the marginalized? I stand with Jesus and say, “No!” What is blasphemous is when we see the work of healing, reconciliation, justice, and peace happening around us or within us and we deny the presence of the Holy Spirit.

This Spirit that filled us at our baptism is the Spirit of the crucified and risen Christ who meets us right here again today at this table and invites us to embody it's crazy, unconventional, life-giving power. Whether you receive it as a dove descending from the heavens, as a fire in your soul, or two hands resting firmly upon your shoulders, you, too, have the Holy Spirit in and with you, setting you free from a narrow religion that is all about maintaining precise boundaries; setting you free for joyful worship and wild hope. You have the Holy Spirit in and with you, setting you free from the judgments of others – even those who are supposed to know you best; setting you free to enjoy this life and love the people God gives you, even those who are difficult to love.

Remember who you are and where you come from: you are God's beloved, born of the Holy Spirit. You have the Holy Spirit with you and within you. Is it crazy to give yourself over to the Spirit's power? It would be crazy not to.

May it be so. Amen.