

The Potential of the Spirit
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A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
Mark 3:20-35
June 10, 2018

It's Graduation Sunday, a day when we look back with fondness on the people and the places that have shaped us, and through the eyes of our graduates we exude hope for the world that will be.

So...it's only fitting that we should read a Gospel text with violent, apocalyptic, divisive imagery – one that opines about unforgivable sin, and challenges our assumptions of family systems, right?!? Sometimes, when we spin the lectionary wheel, it doesn't always land on the most ideal passage.

But Grey and Jackson, maybe that's fitting for today. Because each of you are about to embark on a four-year adventure, and really a lifetime of adventure, where the text won't always print just what you want to read, and people won't always preach just what you want to hear, and artists won't always paint the picture you hoped to see. But as you begin to refine and sharpen your philosophy, and your politics, and your theology, and your outlook on life, you have a remarkable opportunity: you get the chance to begin interacting with people and ideas. And both in ideas and in people, you have the chance to search for deeper meaning, and for common ground, even in places of disagreement, and doubt, and division. And you have a chance to find the holy in the people and places you never imagined possible.

So let me throw something at you. If you read today's text out of context, you might see Jesus as someone who's drawing a dividing line between the righteous and the unrighteous in the same way we see politicians operating in our time. He's saying you are either on my team or you aren't. And you may read Jesus as someone throwing some serious shade at his siblings. And you may hear that phrase *unforgivable sin*, and you may wonder what it is that somebody has to do to be SO cut off from God.

But if you were to read the two chapters that precede this text, you'd hear about a man named Jesus, who was so tapped into, and so filled up with God's presence, that he was literally bringing God's realm into the present. He was healing, and feeding, and caring for others; and he was preaching scriptures in an illuminating way; and he was helping to create a sense of connectedness the likes of which his community had never known.

And nobody, I mean nobody – not the town leaders, not the local clergy, not his high school English teacher, not his Little League baseball coach, not his best friend from grade school, not the little old lady whose lawn he used to mow, not even his mama, or his brothers, or his sisters – none of them, not one single person, could believe what God had put him up to. “No way,” they said, “God doesn't work like that, and God most especially doesn't work through people like you. You must be possessed, you must not feel well, you must let us look out for your welfare.”

The town leaders didn't want Jesus to be Messiah, because they were in charge. And his peers didn't want it either, because when you're down and out, misery loves company. And his family didn't want him to get hurt, or better yet, get them hurt in the process. And so his community, the ones he was most connected to, they didn't believe.

And so what does Jesus do? Well he gives a very strong speech, or at the least the writer of Mark puts very strong language in his lips. But here's how I read what Jesus says. I think he's telling us that God is

here, right now, in our midst. And he uses a phrase *unforgivable sin*. I'd call it alienation or disconnectedness from God. And he says, "You wanna know what's the one thing you can do to be disconnected from or shut off from God? It's to believe that God's spirit is incapable of filling up, of empowering, or transforming anybody and anything in any place and any time."

All of our lives, we've been taught to value the importance of relationships. Both of you are where you are today, because your parents, and your teachers, and your community leaders, and your family members, and your friends, and your church family have been essential in your formation. Jesus is not dismissing the value and importance of these relationships. He's simply saying that God is our center. And when we are filled with God's spirit, we become bound up in something greater than kinship, greater than societal labels, greater than common familiarities. When we follow the will of God, we are family to one another. And every once in a while, there will be times when the will of God, and the things that God calls us to do, will put us at odds with those with whom we are bound to.

For Jesus, that happened a lot. But take note. His language appears kind of harsh here. But nowhere in this text, nowhere, does he assert that anyone in his community, not even his enemies, is incapable of believing in or of being empowered by the Holy Spirit. Jesus believed in the ability for every person to be transformed. And he believed that our connection to one another in God has the ability to transcend every relationship.

Grey and Jackson, we love you and we are proud of you. And pretty soon, you are going to begin engaging with a whole host of people who will see the world in different ways. And you'll like some of what they say, and you'll probably despise some of what they say, too. And you'll begin to form your opinions about this world, and you'll begin to cling to the ideas at your very core. And when you come back at Christmas break, we'll enjoy hearing what you've learned.

And Jackson, when fresh out of your American History course, don't be surprised if a few of us agree with your very thoughtful argument that Lincoln was indeed America's greatest President. And if a few others decide to tell you, "Where's the love for Roosevelt or Washington?" Or Grey, when fresh out of your Anatomy or Physiology classes, you share your insight on the best tactic for muscle recovery, beware of youth hockey and lacrosse coaches who preach different forms of training!!! And now that you are officially a Gamecock, how benign will Pastor Jonathan's red Bulldog tie appear on Sundays?

I hope you will remember that you are rooted in this place, and you are rooted in God. But should you ever need a reminder, I encourage you to look for a table. For at the table, historians may disagree, and trainers may advocate new tactics, and fans may root for opposing teams, and we may come clinging to an identity bound up in family, or citizenship, or place, or something else. But when we break the bread, and when we drink the cup, we are reminded of a God who transcends people and places and ideas. And we are reminded of a God who connects us, restores us, empowers us, welcomes us, and longs for us. And we are reminded that it can happen right now, right here, among those whom we love. And even among those whom we struggle to love. Especially among those whom we struggle to love.

Amen.