

There are two main things happening in today's text (well, actually, there's a lot more than that! But we'll stick with two for now!).

Here's the first thing: Jesus has initiated a powerful new ministry that is resulting in powerful revelations, including healing in the form of exorcisms. The local authorities don't appreciate this disruption to the status quo, and they are openly questioning the source and validity of his authority.

Here's the second thing: Jesus' immediate family members are worried about him; they truly believe he is delusional. And honestly, it's hard to blame them. Because if you lived under Roman rule, you would know very well the eventual consequences for an itinerant preacher who challenges the status quo, and attracts the masses with a populist message. They want Jesus to come home so all of this activism will be forgotten in a few days. And then, their brother can be safe, and get back to his senses, and attend to the needs of his family.

I think this context is vital to our understanding of today's text. Without it, you may have two main takeaways: 1) There is some unforgivable sin of blasphemy that will separate you from God's love and 2) familial relationships are meaningless and unnecessary in the cultivation of God's world. Let me say unequivocally, that neither statement is true. And let me also say that I do not believe our author's intent is for you to come away with either of those sentiments.

So let's dissect this text. We'll start with the demons and such. And then we'll move to mamas, and brothers, and sisters. Remember, Mark's gospel is all about who Jesus is – we're told from the very beginning that Jesus is one who carries and claims God's authority, and it's the use of this very authority and power that's gonna help usher in

God's intentions for the world. Therefore, story after story juxtaposes the world's superficial sources of authority with Jesus' real and authentic authority.

We have exorcisms. A common practice back then, a practice that the scribes in Jerusalem would have participated in. But what happens, when a peasant, untrained and un-picked for such a holy purpose, produces remarkable results? This is something good, and pure, and holy, and wholly of God's making. But for those in power, it's just easier to dismiss it as evil. The devil made him do it, or maybe, he is the devil himself!?!

Jesus reminds the scribes that his authority is greater than they realize. How does evil cast out evil? Wouldn't its very nature make it incapable of such a task? No, you need something good, something of God, something that transcends evil to do such a thing.

And I know, I know, we get that line about an unforgivable sin, and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, but Jesus isn't talking about something tangible. This isn't uttering an ugly word. This isn't working out doubt. This isn't being in a state of clean/unclean, pure/impure, holy/unholy. This isn't about compliance, or righteousness, or discipleship.

This is about a willingness to acknowledge what it is good. If the only way you can view, or imagine, or conceive of the Holy Spirit's existence is to dismiss it as evil, how will you ever recognize what it good? If you insist that good is evil, you'll never be in a spiritual place to understand forgiveness, or grace, or love for that matter. This is about the capacity of the human heart.

Jesus is NOT, is NOT dismissing the notion of a loving God, offering steadfast forgiveness to the thousandth generation. Jesus is offering counsel about the dangers, the isolation, the emptiness of a world where people choose the artificial over the authentic, where people choose to eliminate entirely the possibility of God's presence being permeated in the world.

Let me also be clear on one more point. We as Christians understand this cosmic energy, this manifestation of the divine as the Holy Spirit, and we also see the divine revealed in the life of Jesus. Those are two ways we name God's presence. But I wouldn't dare doubt that there can be other expressions of God just as meaningful and transforming as our own.

I think it comes down to this: none of us will ever fully realize the presence of God if we continue to insist that our evil is able to transcend God's good.

The scribes question Jesus' authority from the top end. His family questions his motives from another perspective. The scribes see Jesus' newly claimed authority as threatening to their own power. Family members see Jesus' newly claimed authority as a threat to his safety, but probably to theirs as well. The scribes cling to their evil authority in order to claim its spoils. Family members recognize the scribes' evil authority in order to avoid its wrath. But in each instance, there is a hesitation to acknowledge that God's authority has a power to transcend scribal authority. Jesus, for his part, refuses to participate in systems, relationships, or structures that do not recognize the power of the Holy Spirit as their primary source of authority.

I think Jesus cares for his family deeply. I think Jesus (and I know Paul did, too) would affirm the benefits and beauty of strong familial ties. His mother was certainly crucial in his ministry. But I think both Jesus and Paul would remind believers that familial relationships should not impede the heart call of the Spirit. I think Jesus and Paul would acknowledge that familial relationships are not always healthy. But more than anything, I think Jesus and Paul would say that love, security, and faith are enhanced, not by simply keeping healthy, collaborative familial relationships intact, but by extending those practices beyond familial relationships. It's not just seeking God's world for my children, my siblings, my partner; it's working to extend God's world for your children, your siblings, and your partners, too. I think Jesus says to his brothers and sisters, I can't be your brother, if I'm not a brother to my siblings in the Spirit, too.

Mark's gospel introduces us to lots of places where our programmed sense of authority inhibits our ability to recognize and respond to the new things God is doing. Our trust in traditional systems, be they the Church, or families, or employers, or governments, or other organizations is not inherently bad. Indeed, in many instances, it's very good. But we need to be aware of those times when our dependence on familiar structures impedes or even supersedes our call to follow the Spirit's authority. In other words, where are the places that our dependence on worldly systems limits our imagination for God's possibilities?

I admit, I have never performed an exorcism, and I doubt I ever will. I have a hard time imagining a demon, or mythical creature lording some power over me, rendering me helpless. But I think all of us face monsters or demons – they are good metaphors for those internal things that hold us back, wall us off from the world, prevent our

realization of God's love, prevent our ability to claim, and own, and realize the dignity and worth God affords us.

Inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, Jesus had a way of letting love break through to the afflicted. God's miraculous, inexplicable healing on display. But rather than celebrate the reclamation and empowerment of sisters and brothers, the world chose to cling to lesser things: a religious rulebook, a family that keeps its affairs to itself, a campaign to restore the status quo. I suppose it was just easier to chance the predictability of the present in lieu of a less definable, albeit significantly more wonderful future. Maybe, at least the risk-averse actuaries were happy.

But all that aside, this story makes me want to be an exorcist, not the creepy kind like in the movies. The world's already had a George C. Scott. But someone, who bound up in God's authority, works to help others realize and reclaim their worth and dignity in the world, invites them into God's presence and love.

And as I imagine that calling for myself, and for our community of faith, I wonder if we can be receptive to God's workings that go beyond our familiar systems? Can a smart phone offer healing? Can our family table be big enough to include other siblings in the Spirit? Do exorcisms always have to be performed on our terms, by our people, in our ways?

I pray that we might be a people who prioritize God's healing over our own publicity and administration, and that seeks the same wellbeing for God's extended family as we do for our internal families.

Friends may it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.